

The Theory of Gradual Sanctification

by Charles Ewing Brown

Sanctification is a process of becoming more like Christ, where the old nature is gradually replaced by the new nature through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture: Romans 4:4, Romans 6:22, Galatians 5:16, Ephesians 6:10, Philippians 3:12, 1 Thessalonians 5:23, 2 Timothy 2:18, Hebrews 12:14, 1 Peter 2:24

Topics: "Sanctification", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

Charles Ewing Brown delves into the doctrine of sanctification, contrasting the Wesleyan belief in sanctification as a second work of grace with the Calvinistic view of gradual sanctification. Dr. Charles Hodge's Systematic Theology is highlighted as a classic work representing the Calvinistic perspective, emphasizing sanctification as a progressive work involving the renewal of the whole person after God's image. The Calvinistic doctrine asserts that sanctification is a supernatural work that involves a gradual triumph of the new nature over the remains of sin, culminating in the believer's complete conformity to Christ. The sermon explores the conflict between the flesh and the Spirit, emphasizing the ongoing struggle against indwelling sin and the need for continual growth in grace.

Transcript

Perhaps it would not be an exaggeration to say that the average Christian of our own time has very hazy ideas about the nature and meaning of sanctification. As we have elsewhere pointed out, many thousands of Christians in America accept the Wesleyan doctrine of sanctification as a second work of grace. Christians who do not hold that doctrine generally have a confused mass of ideas and traditions which, when analyzed and formulated, may be seen to be based upon the historical doctrine of sanctification as set forth and expounded by the great Calvinistic theologians.

Probably the foremost of modern classics in this field is the Systematic Theology of Dr. Charles Hodge. Not within a hundred years has any theologian stated the historical position of Calvinism more ably than he. Therefore we take some space to set forth his views, because nearly every Christian doctrine of sanctification which opposes the Wesleyan theory will be found to rest upon Calvinistic theology; and an examination of the Calvinistic and anti-Wesleyan doctrine of sanctification will serve to disclose, along with the divergencies, areas of agreement in the doctrine of sanctification in Christian theology sometimes overlooked by those who discuss the doctrine merely in the light of current, popular sentimentalism.

Dr. Hodge gives voluminous treatment to the doctrine of sanctification, and it is necessary to shorten the quotations given somewhat; but this is done conscientiously, in the belief that direct reference to his works, available in all first-class theological libraries will show that he has not been misrepresented in the quotations cited. Dr. Hodge says:

Sanctification in the Westminster Catechism is said to be 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.

Agreeable to this definition, justification differs from sanctification, (1) in that the former is a transient act, the latter, a progressive work. (2) Justification is a forensic act, God acting as judge, declaring justice satisfied so far as the believing sinner is concerned, whereas sanctification is an effect due to the divine efficiency. (3) Justification changes, or declares to be changed, the relation of the sinner to the justice of God; sanctification involves a change of character. (4) The former, therefore, is objective, the latter subjective. (5) The former is founded on what Christ has done for us; the latter is the effect of what He does in us. (6) Justification is complete and the same in all, while sanctification is progressive, and is more complete in some than in others. [5]

Admitting sanctification to be a supernatural work, the question still remains, What does It consist in? What is the nature of the effect produced? The truth which lies at the foundation of all the scriptural representations of this subject is, that regeneration, the quickening, of which believers are the subject, while it involves the implanting, or communication of a new principle or form of life, does not effect the immediate and entire deliverance of the soul from all sin. A man raised from the dead may be and long continue to be, in a very feeble, diseased, and suffering state. So the soul by nature dead in sin, may be quickened together with Christ, and not be rendered thereby perfect. The principle of life may be very feeble, it may have much in the soul uncongenial with its nature, and the conflict between the old and the new life may be protracted and painful. Such not only may be, but such in fact is the ease in all the ordinary experience of the people of God. Here we find one of the characteristic and far-reaching differences between the Romish and Protestant systems, nothing of the nature of sin remains in the soul after regeneration as effected in baptism. From this the theology of the Church of Rome deduces its doctrine of the merit of good works; of perfection; of works of supererogation; and, indirectly, those of absolution and indulgences. But according to the Scriptures, the universal experience of Christians, and the undeniable evidence of history, regeneration does not remove all sin. The Bible is filled with the record of the inward conflicts of the most eminent of the servants of God, with their falls, their backslidings, their repentings, and their lamentations over their continued shortcomings. And not only this, but the nature of the conflict between good and evil in the heart of the renewed is fully described, the contending principles are distinguished and designated, and the necessity, difficulties, and perils of the struggle, as well as the method of properly sustaining it, are set forth repeatedly and in detail. In the seventh chapter of the Epistle to the Romans we have an account of this conflict elaborately described by the Apostle as drawn from his own experience. And the same thing occurs in Galatians 5:16-17: "This I say then, walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would." Again, in Ephesians 6:10-18, in view of the conflict which the believer has to sustain with the evils of his own heart and with the powers of darkness, the Apostle exhorts his brethren to be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might ... "Wherefore take unto you the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand."

With the teachings of the Scriptures the experience of Christians in all ages and in all parts of the Church agrees. Their writings are filled with the account of their struggles with the remains of sin in their own hearts; with confessions; with prayers for divine aid; and with longings after the final victory over all evil, which is to be experienced only in heaven. The great lights of the Latin Church, the Augustines and Bernards and Fenelons, were humble, penitent, struggling believers, even to the last, and with Paul did not regard themselves as having already attained, or as being already perfect. And what the Bible and Christian experience prove to be true, history puts beyond dispute. Either there is no such thing as regeneration in the world, or regeneration does not remove all sin from those who are its subjects.

PUTTING OFF THE OLD, AND PUTTING ON THE NEW MAN

Such being the foundation of the scriptural representations concerning sanctification, its nature is thereby determined. As all men since the fall are in a state of sin, not only sinners because guilty of specific acts of transgression, but also as depraved, their nature perverted and corrupted, regeneration is the infusion of a new principle of life in this corrupt nature. It is leaven introduced to diffuse its influence gradually through the whole mass. Sanctification, therefore, consists in two things: first, the removing more and more the principles of evil still infecting our nature, and destroying their power; and secondly, the growth of the principle of spiritual life until it controls the thoughts, feelings, and acts, and brings the soul into the image of Christ.

WHAT ROMANS 7:7-25 TEACHES

Assuming, then, that we have in this chapter an account of the experience of a true and even of an advanced Christian, we learn that in every Christian there is a mixture of good and evil; that the original corruption of nature is not entirely removed by regeneration; that although the believer is made a new creature, is translated from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God's dear Son, he is but partially sanctified; that his selfishness, pride, discontent, worldliness, still cleave to, and torment him, that they effectually prevent his "doing what he would," they prevent his living without sin, they prevent his intercourse with God being as intimate and uninterrupted as he could and does desire. He finds not only that he is often, even daily, overcome so as to sin in thought, word, and deed, but also that his faith, love, zeal, and devotion are never such as to satisfy his own conscience; much less can they satisfy God. He therefore is daily called upon to confess, repent, and pray for forgiveness. The Apostle designates these conflicting principles which he found within himself, the one, indwelling sin; "sin that dwelleth in me"; or the "law in my members"; "the law of sin"; the other, "the mind," "the law of my mind," "the inward man."

We learn, further, that the control of the evil principle is resisted, that subjection to it is regarded as a hateful bondage, that the good principle is in the main victorious, and that through Christ it will ultimately be completely triumphant. Sanctification therefore, according to this representation, consists in the gradual triumph of the new nature implanted in regeneration over the evil that still remains after the heart is renewed. In other words, as elsewhere expressed, it is a dying unto sin and living unto righteousness (1 Pet. 2:24).

PERFECTIONISM

Protestant Doctrine

The doctrine of Lutherans and Reformed, the two great branches of the Protestant Church, is, that sanctification is never perfected in this life; that sin is not in any case entirely subdued; so that the most

advanced believer has need as long as he continues in the flesh, daily to pray for the forgiveness of sins.

God has in Christ made provision for the complete salvation of his people: that is, for their entire deliverance from the penalty of the law, from the power of sin, from all sorrow, pain, and death; and not only for mere negative deliverance, but for their being transformed into the image of Christ, filled with his Spirit, and glorified by the beauty of the Lord. It is, however, too plain that, unless sanctification be an exception, no one of these promises, besides that which concerns justification, is perfectly fulfilled in this life. Justification does not admit of degrees. A man either is under condemnation, or he is not. And, therefore, from the nature of the case, justification is instantaneous and complete [Why is not sanctification the same?] , as soon as the sinner believes. But the question is, whether when God promises to make his people perfectly holy, perfectly happy, and perfectly glorious, He thereby promises to make them perfect in holiness in this life? If the promises of happiness and glory are not perfectly fulfilled in this life, why should the promise of sanctification be thus fulfilled? [This is confusing the happiness and glory of heaven with the privilege of salvation from sin in this life, repeatedly promised in the New Testament]

PASSAGES WHICH DESCRIBE THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE FLESH AND THE SPIRIT

More definitely is this truth taught in those passages which describe the conflict in the believer between the flesh and the Spirit. To this reference has already been made. That the seventh chapter of Paul's Epistle to the Romans is an account of his own inward life at the time of writing that Epistle, has already, as it is believed, been sufficiently proved; and such has been the belief of the great body of evangelical Christians in all ages of the Church. If this be the correct interpretation of that passage, then it proves that Paul, at least, was not free from sin; that he had to contend with a law in his members, warring against the law of his mind; that he groaned constantly under the burden of indwelling sin. At a still later period of his life, when he was just ready to be offered up, he says to the Philippians (3:12-14), "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." [The Apostle was not here denying his present attainment of full salvation. He was opposing the heresy of such men as Hymenaeus and Philetus, "who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already" (II Tim. 2:18). Paul denies that he has attained to the perfection of bodily resurrection. For a fuller discussion of all such passages see my book *The Meaning of Salvation*.] This is an unmistakable declaration on the part of the Apostle that even at this late period of his life he was not yet perfect; he had not attained the end of perfect conformity to Christ, but was pressing forward, as one in a race, with all earnestness that he might reach the end of his calling. To answer this, as has been done by some distinguished advocates of perfectionism, by saying that Paul's not being perfect is no proof that other men may not be is not very satisfactory.

The parallel passage in Galatians (5:16-26) is addressed to Christians generally. It recognizes the fact that they are imperfectly sanctified; that in them the renewed principle, the Spirit as the source of spiritual life, is in conflict with the flesh, the remains of their corrupt nature. It exhorts them to mortify the flesh (not the body, but their corrupt nature) and to strive constantly to walk under the controlling influence of the Spirit. The characteristic difference between the unrenewed and the renewed is not that the former are entirely sinful, and the latter perfectly holy; but that the former are wholly under the control of their fallen nature, while the latter have the Spirit of God dwelling in them, which leads them to crucify the flesh, and to strive

after complete conformity to the image of God. There was nothing in the character of the Galatian Christians to render this exhortation applicable to them alone. What the Scriptures teach concerning faith, repentance, and justification, is intended for all Christians; and so what is taught of sanctification suits the case of all believers. Indeed, if a man thinks himself perfect, and apprehends that he has already attained what his fellow believers are only striving for, a great part of the Bible must for him lose its value. What use can he make of the Psalms, the vehicle through which the people of God for millenniums have poured out their hearts? How can such a man sympathize with Ezra, Nehemiah, or any of the prophets? How strange to him must be the language of Isaiah, "Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts." [6]

These extensive quotations have been given because they state far more forcefully than the average opponent of the Wesleyan doctrine of sanctification ever could present the arguments against entire sanctification as obtainable in this life. Moreover, this Calvinistic doctrine is certified as orthodox for all of that faith by the verdict of the Westminster Confession, which reads as follows:

They who are effectually called and regenerated, having a new heart and a new spirit created in them, are further sanctified, really and personally, through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, by his Word and Spirit dwelling in them; the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed, and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified, and they more and more quickened and strengthened, in all saving graces, to the practice of true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.

2. This sanctification is throughout in the whole man, yet imperfect in this life; there abideth still some remnants of corruption in every part, whence ariseth a continual and irreconcilable war, the flesh lusting against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh.

3. In which war, although the remaining corruption for a time may much prevail, yet, through the continual supply of strength from the sanctifying Spirit of Christ, the regenerate part doth overcome; and so the saints grow in grace, perfecting holiness in the fear of God." [7]

Likewise, that entire creed indicates the moment when all inbred sin is to be eradicated from the heart of the believer. That moment is at the instant of death. "The souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory." [8]

If anyone should object to being represented by Dr. Hodge and the Westminster Confession, we can only say that these documents represent the ablest presentation of the most widely held of all anti-Wesleyan Christian doctrines of sanctification. We are not interested in any anti-Christian discussion of sanctification, but only in studying the question from a Christian viewpoint.

A DOCTRINE OF ANTI-SANCTIFICATION

Accepting these authorities, then, as valid representatives of the Christian anti-Wesleyan doctrine of sanctification, we must reply that this is not a doctrine of sanctification, but rather of anti-sanctification. As we study the Calvinistic theory of gradual sanctification we are reminded of a character in ancient Greek mythology, Sisyphus, who in Hades was condemned to roll up a hill a great stone which constantly rolled back, making his task incessant; and if there ever was an incessant task of achieving sanctification it is the

one set by Calvinism that assures a man that even if he should have sixty years of effort before him and that if he should do his utmost he would, notwithstanding, never be free from sin until the moment of his death.

At the same time, a young man converted at the age of sixteen, who was entirely ignorant of the doctrine of gradual sanctification would, if he died, say within six months, be just as completely and fully sanctified as the man who had striven for the attainment of the experience throughout sixty years. What we object to here is the confusion of two conceivable methods of obtaining the experience. If sanctification is a gift from God, then the sixteen-year-old convert, who had been saved only six months, may seem to have a logical right to this gift as much as the veteran saint of many years. But that right would be based upon the experience as a gift from God. On the contrary, if it is something which a man works out for himself by long and painful effort, surely there is something incongruous in thinking that he will have no more gains for his pains in sixty years of struggle than a youth would have in six months of making practically no effort at all to that end. Merely to contemplate these facts is to assure a reasonable mind that sanctification is not an attainment. It is not something for which a man works; it is a gift. It is not a thing that a man grows into; it is a given thing, which he receives.

Dr. Hodge gives this whole argument away when he admits that sanctification is supernatural and comes by faith. It is impossible to combine gradual sanctification with the doctrine of sanctification by faith. Gradual sanctification fits in well with the doctrine of works. It might be presumed to come as a reward for long service in the kingdom, but as Paul has said, "to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt" (Rom. 4:4). If a Christian is sanctified as the reward of long striving against inward sin, then he receives the payment of a debt which God owes him, and his reward is not of grace nor of faith. These two methods will not mix. This doctrine of sanctification by works is a denial of the whole principle of salvation by faith.

WORK WITHOUT PAY

While the Calvinistic doctrine of sanctification achieved gradually by hard and toilsome effort is a denial of the principle of salvation by faith, it has a further defect. The attainment of the reward of sanctification bears no proper logical relation to the amount of effort which the seeker puts forth in order to obtain it. The sixteen-year-old convert who died six months after his conversion obtained entire sanctification entirely as fully and as completely as the aged saint who worked at the task for sixty years. Surely sanctification is not by works, or the veteran saint would not have to do a thousand times more to receive it than the youthful Christian. And remember that the veteran saint does not receive one iota more of holiness and sanctification than the youthful Christian who died in the first flush of his conversion. Both received exactly the same boon of entire sanctification.

THE DOCTRINE OF GRADUAL SANCTIFICATION

Demands Purgatory

These considerations show that the moment of death as the end of the process of sanctification and the exact time of its obtainment is chosen purely for dogmatic reasons. The doctrine is shaped in this form merely to avoid the Roman Catholic dogma of purgatory. Had it not been for a radical antipathy to that doctrine, Calvinists would have followed the logic of their position and would have said that the accomplishment of the work of entire sanctification would require a certain amount of effort and toil. If that toil is completed before death, then a man will be sanctified possibly twenty or thirty years before his

death. If, on the contrary, it is not accomplished at the moment of his death then it will be finished in purgatory after possibly hundreds of years of suffering and painful toil. Mind, I do not say that this is Calvinistic doctrine; but rather that the presuppositions of the theory call for it and that the logical development of the doctrine was prevented from coming to maturity by opposition to the doctrine of purgatory. In other words, the Calvinistic doctrine of sanctification by works requires a purgatory to make it consistent and logical.

Now we of the Wesleyan school oppose the doctrine of purgatory as much as the Calvinists do, but we have a doctrine of sanctification which teaches that the remains of sin in believers are not eradicated by long labor and toil, but are destroyed in one crisis-experience of active faith in the moment when the soul is baptized with the Holy Ghost and with power.

Christians must take their choice, unless indeed they deny the historic teachings of Protestantism and assert that there is no inbred sin in believers and therefore entire sanctification is accomplished at the moment of conversion. This theory is not only unscriptural, it is also contrary to experience and observation as applied to the lives of Christians.

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