

CHAPTER 13

OF SANCTIFICATION

JEFFERY SMITH

1. They who are united to Christ, effectually called, and regenerated, having a new heart and a new spirit created in them through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, are also farther sanctified, really and personally,¹ through the same virtue, by his Word and Spirit dwelling in them;² the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed,³ and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified,⁴ and they more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces,⁵ to the practice of all true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.⁶

2. This sanctification is throughout the whole man,⁷ yet imperfect in this life; there abideth still some remnants of corruption in every part,⁸ whence ariseth a continual and irreconcilable war; the flesh lusting against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh.⁹

3. In which war, although the remaining corruption for a time may much prevail,¹⁰ yet through the continual supply of strength from the sanctifying Spirit of Christ, the regenerate part doth overcome;¹¹ and so the saints grow in grace, perfecting holiness in the fear of God, pressing

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1. Acts 20:32; Romans 6:5-6
 2. John 17:17; Ephesians 3:16-19; 1 Thessalonians 5:21-23
 3. Romans 6:14
 4. Galatians 5:24
 5. Colossians 1:11
 6. 2 Corinthians 7:1; Hebrews 12:14
 7. 1 Thessalonians 5:23
 8. Romans 7:18, 23
 9. Galatians 5:17; 1 Peter 2:11
 10. Romans 7:23
 11. Romans 6:14

after an heavenly life, in evangelical obedience to all the commands which Christ as Head and King, in his Word hath prescribed them.¹²

The word translated in the New Testament as “sanctification” is sometimes translated, “holiness.” It is the word *hagiasmos* (ἁγιασμός), the noun form of the verb “to sanctify,” “to make holy” (*hagiazō*, ἁγιάζω). The basic meaning of the verb is to set apart from that which is common or unclean and to consecrate unto God. The Hebrew counterpart *qadash* (קדש), which is translated by this Greek word in the Septuagint, is sometimes used of inanimate objects. For example, in the Old Testament we read of the holy mount on which the law was given to Moses. Mount Sinai was sanctified in the sense that it was separated from common use and consecrated to God as the special place from which He gave the revelation of His law. We also have reference to holy buildings, vessels, utensils, and other things used in the tabernacle and in the temple. These things were separated from common use and devoted to God’s service. In the case of these inanimate objects, they were separated from ceremonial defilement and uncleanness and devoted to God.

In the New Testament, when applied to Christians, to be holy, or to be sanctified, refers primarily to being set apart from sin and uncleanness and devoted to God and righteousness. It is also used to refer to the attitude of heart and walk of life reflecting this separation and devotion. This is the subject of this chapter of the Confession.

Paragraph 1: The Fact of Sanctification

This first paragraph establishes the fact that those who are in Christ undergo the work of sanctification. It also describes the nature of this sanctification of which they are made partakers.

Its Subjects

The subjects of sanctification are described as “they who are united to Christ, effectually called, and regenerated.” It should be noted that Chapter 11 on justification begins in a similar way: “Those whom God effectually calleth, he also freely justifieth.” Chapter 12 on adoption begins, “All those that are justified, God vouchsafed, in and for the sake of his only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption.” And now Chapter 13 describes the subjects of sanctification as “they who are united to Christ, effectually called, and regenerated.”

It is not my place to address all the terms used to describe the various elements of the salvation that sinners receive in Christ: effectual calling, regeneration, justification, and adoption. These are addressed in other chapters of this book. However, it is important to see that the writers of the Confession understood that *all* who are in union with Christ receive *all* of these blessings of salvation. Those who are effectually called and regenerated are also justified, those who are justified are also adopted

12. Ephesians 4:15-16; 2 Corinthians 3:18; 2 Corinthians 7:1

and those who are adopted are also sanctified. The Confession does not condone a view of salvation in which a believer may be made a partaker of one or more of these blessings without also being made a partaker of all of them.

One reason for this is that the benefits of salvation are never separated in the New Testament from the Savior Himself. Notice, again, that this chapter begins with these words, “They who are united to Christ...” Calling, regeneration, justification, adoption, and sanctification are to be found in Christ and our union with Him. When a sinner is experientially united to Christ by the Spirit through faith, he becomes a partaker of all that Christ has purchased by His blood.

This doesn’t mean that every blessing of salvation is the same thing. Justification is not adoption or sanctification, adoption is not justification or sanctification, and sanctification is not justification or adoption. There are important distinctions to be made when it comes to what comprises each of these blessings of salvation and the manner in which we experience them.

For example, consider the distinctions between justification and sanctification. They are not the same thing, and it is, indeed, very important to understand this, and not to confuse them.¹³ *Justification* has to do with our forgiveness and acceptance with God for the sake of Christ’s righteousness freely put to our account. *Sanctification* has to do with our being made righteous in our own life experience by the power of the Holy Spirit. *Justification* has to do with our bad record being once and for all cleared in heaven. *Sanctification* has to do with our bad hearts and behavior being changed on earth.¹⁴ *Justification* is a finished and completed work, and a believer is perfectly justified forever from the moment he is joined to Christ through faith. *Sanctification* is an imperfect work that begins at conversion and progressively grows and increases and is never perfected until we reach glory. *Justification* is a declaration of God about us, that we are forgiven and accepted by Him as righteous for Christ’s sake. *Sanctification* is the work of God within us by which we are more and more conformed to the image of His Son. My point is that there is a sense in which we *must* distinguish between justification and sanctification when it comes to their definitions and in our consciences. They are both vital parts of salvation, but they are two distinct parts that must not be confused or mixed together.

However, there is a danger of separating justification and sanctification in a wrong way by believing or teaching that a person can have one of these blessings without having the other. There are those in the history of the church who have taught this and, in one form or another, this is

13. I draw some of the pithy comparisons in this paragraph between justification and sanctification from the similar ones given by J. C. Ryle, *Holiness* (1879 reprint, Durham, England: Evangelical Press, 1991), 29-30.

14. The coupling of “bad record” and “bad heart” is taken from the gospel booklet entitled *A Bad Record and a Bad Heart* based on a sermon with that title by Albert N. Martin (Avinger, Texas: Simpson Publishing Company, 1989).

a popular teaching today in some circles. The idea is conveyed that a man can be a saved man and *only* be justified and not also be sanctified. He can have his bad record cleared in heaven without also having his bad heart and behavior changed and redirected toward the pursuit of holiness here on earth. The Confession is completely opposed to this kind of teaching. In agreement with Scripture, as we'll see, it makes clear that when a sinner is united to Christ by the Spirit and by faith, he is not only justified, he is also sanctified. Sanctification is not an optional extra for Christians. It is an essential part of the salvation God gives to all who are in union with His Son.

Its Beginning in Definitive Sanctification

The Confession goes on to speak of the beginning of sanctification: "They who are united to Christ, effectually called, and regenerated, having a new heart and a new spirit created in them through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection..." It is evident that this description is intended to describe the *beginning* of sanctification because of the phrase that follows, "are also farther sanctified..." There is an initial sanctification and a "farther" sanctification. There is the inception of sanctification and there is the increase of sanctification.¹⁵ According to the Confession, our union with Christ in His death and resurrection has not only secured our justification, but it is the basis and the effectual cause of there being created within us a new heart and a new spirit. This is initial sanctification.

This may also be called "definitive sanctification."¹⁶ There is a definitive sanctification at conversion followed by progressive sanctification throughout the course of the Christian's life. By "definitive" is meant a decisive, once-and-for-all act. When we speak of sanctification, generally we tend to think of it as a gradual process of moral and spiritual transformation.¹⁷ It is right and biblical to apply the term "sanctification" to this process.¹⁸ But it is often overlooked that in the New Testament sanctification is not only spoken of as a process. It is also often spoken of as a once-and-for-all definitive act.¹⁹ The term "definitive sanctification" is a way of referring to the "basic and radical change that takes place in a sinner's moral and ethical condition when he is united to Christ in effectual calling and regeneration."²⁰ He is not only justified the moment

15. Sam Waldron uses this language of "inception" and "increase" in his outline of this chapter in *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith* (Darlington, Co. Durham, UK: Evangelical Press, 1989), 174.

16. I believe this language "definitive" sanctification was first used by John Murray or that it was at least popularized in modern reformed theology by his use of this term to describe the inception of sanctification. See John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray, Volume Two: Select Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 277-84.

17. *Ibid.*, 277.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*

20. Waldron. *Modern Exposition of the 1689*, 175.

he believes, he is not only pardoned and accepted by God on the basis of the merit of Christ put to his account, but there is also a decisive separation from the reigning dominion of sin and a consecration to God that occurs at conversion. Let's consider the biblical evidence for this.

The Way the Words for Sanctification Are Often Used in the New Testament
 In terms of frequency, the word for "sanctification" in its adjective, verb, and noun forms is used more often to refer to definitive sanctification than it is to progressive sanctification. First, there's the *adjective form* which is translated "holy" or "saint" (*hagios, ἅγιος*). It is often used in the plural to refer to all Christians, not just to a select few. All believers are referred to in the New Testament as "saints" or "holy ones" or "sanctified ones." For example, Paul addresses his epistle to the Philippians, "To all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi." "To all the saints," literally, "to all the holy ones, the sanctified ones." This implies that at conversion every believer is made a holy one, a saint. There has been a definitive separation from common use and separation unto devotion to God.

Second, we often see the same thing in the way the *verb form* of the word is used. For example, consider 1 Corinthians 1:2: Paul is introducing his letter and writes, "To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints." Notice, he refers to these Corinthian Christians as "those who are sanctified." We have here a participle in the perfect tense, which could be translated as "those having been sanctified," or "those who have been sanctified," or simply, "sanctified." This is something that has already occurred once and for all. In the New King James translation from which I am quoting, the words "to be" in the phrase "called *to be* saints" are in italics. This translation implies that being a saint is a goal they must attain and that would be true.²¹ But in the first part of the verse they are described as already sanctified and this may be the idea in this last phrase as well. This is better captured by the New American Standard translation "saints by calling," instead of "called to be saints." They have been sanctified and they are saints.

Consider 1 Corinthians 6:11. Paul is describing what happened to these Corinthian Christians at their conversion and he says, "And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God." Notice two things here. He says, "You *were* sanctified." Again, this is a sanctification already true of them. Then notice the order. Which comes first in this verse, sanctification or justification? Sanctification comes first. This is not progressive sanctification that follows justification. This is a definitive sanctification. They were washed, through the washing of regeneration, by virtue of which they were sanctified. They were set apart from sin unto God and unto holiness. And they were also

21. David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2003), 27.

justified, declared righteous in their legal standing on the ground of the righteousness of Christ put to their account. All of this had already occurred at their conversion. They weren't being washed, being sanctified, and being justified, they were already washed, sanctified, and justified.

Third, we also often see this in the way the noun form of the word is used. Consider 2 Thessalonians 2:13: "But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth." Notice the order, "Sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth." Sanctification is mentioned first. Then notice something else important here. This sanctification is an operation of the Spirit. It is not simply a change in legal status or a change of position. This is the way that some have interpreted these texts we have been surveying. They agree that these texts are not speaking of the ongoing progressive sanctification of the believer, but then they say that they are speaking of a *positional* sanctification that occurs at conversion.²² But here in 2 Thessalonians 2:13, Paul is not speaking merely of a positional change, a mere change in legal status or position before God. This initial sanctification is a work of the Spirit. It is a subjective change in the person, and of the person, produced by the Holy Spirit. This is why the term "definitive sanctification," as opposed to "positional sanctification," is much better for describing this initial aspect of sanctification. Now there may, indeed, be a sense in which we can describe this initial sanctification as positional. It does involve a change in our position, in the sense that we are now set apart unto God. But it is not only a positional change. It is a real and subjective change. As the Confession states, it involves "having a new heart and a new spirit created in them."

Consider 1 Peter 1:2. Peter is introducing his letter and he describes those to whom he is writing as "elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ." Peter references the entire Trinity. We have election according to the foreknowledge of God the Father. We have sanctification of the Spirit. And we have sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ. Notice the order. This is not a progressive sanctification that follows conversion. This is an initial sanctification that occurs at conversion. Here we have the word "sanctification" followed by the preposition *eis* with the accusative, meaning "into," "unto," or "with this goal or intention," and you'll notice again that this is a work of

22. Michael P.V. Barret, *Complete in Him: A Guide to Understanding and Enjoying the Gospel* (Greenville, SC: Ambassador-Emerald International, 2000), 196-97. Dr. Barret writes, speaking of this first dimension of sanctification, "it refers to positional sanctification. This is most likely the sense intended by Paul when he identified the believers in Corinth 'as sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints'...The whole point of the epistle is that in practice, the Corinthians were not acting like saints (literally, holy or sanctified ones), although in reality and fact they were saints. This positional sanctification essentially equates with justification and designates the acceptance the believer has before God in Jesus Christ."

the Spirit. This is not merely a positional sanctification, just a change in status, like justification is. It is a work of the Spirit issuing in obedience. All of these uses of the word in its adjective, verb, and noun forms force us to the conclusion that sanctification is not to be thought of exclusively in terms of a progressive work. Sanctification in one sense *is* to be thought of as a progressive work, as we will see later. But in these texts, the language of sanctification refers to a decisive action or event that occurs at the very inception of the Christian life and one that characterizes all true believers. Let's push a little further. Not only is this definitive sanctification seen in the way the word is often used, it's also seen in...

Key Passages in the New Testament That Describe What Happens in Conversion

There are several passages we could look at, but let us draw our attention to the one that is probably most familiar, Romans 6:1-14:

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be *in the likeness* of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with *Him*, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him. For *the death* that He died, He died to sin once for all; but *the life* that He lives, He lives to God. Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members *as* instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members *as* instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.

Probably no passage is more instructive when it comes to definitive sanctification than this text. The constraints of this essay will not allow me to give a full and detailed exposition of it but here are the main lines of thought we need to see. Paul has just demonstrated in Romans 3:21–5:21 that the believer's righteous standing and acceptance with God is not based on his own works but on the work of another on his behalf, even the redemptive work of Christ. He has been setting forth the glorious doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. But now in Romans 6:1, he anticipates an objection to this doctrine and a potential abuse of it by wicked men. "But Paul, if, as you say, sinners as sinners are justified by grace alone through faith alone, why

not just keep on living in sin that grace may abound? It doesn't matter how we live." This is the error and the objection Paul is anticipating as he begins this chapter.

He writes in verse 1, "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" Having anticipated the objection, he then answers the objection. He says in verse 2, "Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?" We have an aorist in the indicative mood. An aorist in the indicative mood normally points to a past time event. There was a specific point in the past when this death occurred. "How shall we who died to sin, live any longer in it?"

Then he goes on to give an extended explanation in verses 3-10. He explains that the believer died to sin in the death of the Lord Jesus. We who are in Christ are united to Him in His death to sin and we are also raised with Him in His resurrection to live a new life. This is symbolized by our baptism.

When did this happen? In one sense, we died with Christ when He died. Jesus was dying as our substitute and representative, even before we existed. In fact, we were chosen *in Him* before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). But we do not actually die with Him in our legal position and standing before God until our conversion. Our old man was crucified with Him as a completed past action in that very moment that we were joined to Him by faith. Sin can no longer condemn us and damn us for we already died in the death of Christ for us.

Furthermore, being joined to Him in His death, we are also raised with Him. Union with Christ in His death always involves union with Christ in His resurrection also. Christ is one, His work is one. His death and resurrection cannot be separated. Notice how Paul brings the two together in verses 3-4: "Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore, we were buried with Him through baptism into death, *that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.*" Verse 5: "For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, *certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection.*" Verse 8: "Now if we died with Christ, we believe that *we shall also live with Him.*"

Why is it important that being united to Christ in His death, we are also united to Him in His resurrection? Because this is the reason that having died with Christ we are no longer the slaves of sin. Christ, having finished the work of our salvation, rose from the dead. His resurrection takes place by the power of the Spirit. Believers, being united to Him, receive that same Spirit by which Christ was raised from the dead. We enter into a new life by the Spirit, a new spiritual life, in which sin no longer reigns over us. Because our sins have been dealt with and our old man has been crucified with Christ, the barrier that existed between us and God has been removed and we now receive the gift of the Spirit. And by the power of the Spirit we are enabled to walk in newness of life.

Notice, this is exactly the way Paul puts it in Romans 7:6: “We have died to that which we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit.” Or in Romans 8:1-2, 4: “There is, therefore, now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus... For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death... that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” And he goes on in that chapter to tell us that, if we are in Christ, the Spirit of Christ dwells in us and he describes this new life that the Spirit produces in God’s people.

Going back to Romans 6, Paul is telling us that our justification in Christ inevitably produces sanctification also because it brings us into this new realm of the Spirit’s power. It was our guilt and our sin that separated us from God and that included the fact that it separated us from the life-giving Spirit of God, who is God. Our old man was separated from the life of God by our sins. Therefore, until our sins were dealt with and we were justified, we remained in bondage, not only to the guilt, but also to the enslaving power of sin. But in Christ our old man was crucified, put to death, and we have been justified from sin (6:7).²³ And just as Christ was raised from the dead, we also are united with Him in His resurrection. Because of our union with Christ, His Spirit dwells within us and we are raised together with Him to walk in newness of life. John Stott gives a helpful illustration.

Suppose there is a man called John Jones, an elderly Christian believer, who is looking back upon his long life. His career is divided by his conversion into two parts, the old self—John Jones before his conversion—and the new self—John Jones after his conversion. The old self and the new self (or the “old man” and the “new man”) are not John Jones’ two natures; they are the two halves of his life, separated by the new birth. At conversion, signified in baptism, John Jones, the old self, died through union with Christ, the penalty of his sin borne. At the same time John Jones rose again from death, a new man, to live a new life to God.

Now John Jones is every believer. We are John Jones, if we are in Christ. The way in which our old self died is that we were crucified with Christ.

A little further on, Stott amplifies his illustration in this way: Our biography is written in two volumes. Volume one is the story of the old man, the old self, of me before my conversion. Volume two is the story of the new man, the new self, of me after I was made a new creation in Christ. Volume one of my biography ended with the judicial death of the old self. I was a sinner. I deserved to die. I did die. I received my deserts in my Substitute with whom I have become one. Volume two of my biography opened with my resurrection. My old life having finished, a new life to God has begun.²⁴

23. The word translated “freed” in v.7 of Romans six is *dedikaiotai* (δεδικαιώται), which is a perfect passive form of the verb *dikaioo* (δικαίω), to justify.

24. John Stott, *Men Made New: An Exposition of Romans 6-8* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 38-39, as quoted by James Montgomery Boice, *Romans Volume 2: The Reign of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1992), 655.

This has occurred once and for all for the Christian. This is a definitive sanctification. We have died with Christ, and we have been raised with Christ.

But then Paul follows these statements of fact with exhortations. Definitive sanctification is then the basis of progressive sanctification. Because you have died to sin in the death of Christ and have been raised in union with Christ to newness of life, here is what you must do, verse 11, "Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord." He is not saying reckon this to be so in order to make it so. No, it is so. You are dead, indeed, to sin and alive to God in union with Christ. This is a fact. But now you must believe it and reckon it to indeed be so. Then, in light of this reality, verse 12 tells you what you must do: "Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts." You are no longer the old man you once were. Being united to Christ you have been raised with Him to a new life. His Spirit now lives within you. Therefore, in this confidence put away sins and pursue holiness! Do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts.

The implication is that the old slave master, sin, will be constantly attempting to frighten you and to reestablish his cruel mastery over you. But we are not to give ourselves up to his claims. We are to resist him in the confidence that he is no longer our master. In Christ I am not the same man I once was. I am a new man who has been freed from sin's tyrannical dominion. According to verse 13, you are "not to present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness."

Now there are three simple principles that may be derived from this overview of Romans 6. *One*, we learn from this passage that every believer, everyone who has been justified by faith, has also been made spiritually alive in Christ to walk in newness of life; definitive sanctification. *Two*, we learn that every believer who is a new man in Christ must still constantly and deliberately battle with remaining sin; progressive sanctification. *Three*, we learn that every believer who has died and been raised to new life in Christ and must deal with remaining sin, must do so from this perspective and confidence that he is no longer the old man. His old man has died with Christ and he has been made a new person in Christ. In other words, progressive sanctification is to be pursued in the confidence of definitive sanctification.

So with respect to the reality of sanctification, we have reference in this first paragraph to its subjects and to its beginning in definitive sanctification. But then we also have reference to...

Its Increase in Progressive Sanctification

"They who are united to Christ, effectually called, and regenerated, having a new heart and a new spirit created in them through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, are also farther sanctified..." Definitive

sanctification is just the beginning. It is the inception of sanctification but not the completion of sanctification. The sanctification begun in conversion is subject to increase. The believer in Christ is “farther sanctified, really and personally, through the same virtue.” That is by virtue of Christ’s death and resurrection. Here we have reference to progressive sanctification.

The Fact of Progressive Sanctification

Earlier, we saw several places where the word “sanctification” in various forms is used to refer to an initial sanctification. But it is also used to refer to something that is still ongoing and progressive. For example, in John 17:17, Jesus is praying for His disciples, “Sanctify them by Your truth.” Is He praying for the initial definitive sanctification that occurs at conversion? No, those for whom He is praying are envisioned as already being Christians. They have already undergone an initial definitive separation from evil and from the world and a consecration to God. They are already described in this prayer as those who have kept Your word (v. 6); those who have believed that You sent Me (v. 8); those who are hated by the world (v. 14), and those who are not of this world (v. 16). He is praying for those who are viewed as already converted and He prays that they might be sanctified. In one sense, they are sanctified, but they still need to be sanctified more and more.

We see the word used this way in 1 Thessalonians 5:23 where Paul prays for the Thessalonian Christians: “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely.” They still need to be sanctified more and more. They were not yet sanctified completely, and he prays that, ultimately, they will be. In 1 Thessalonians 4:3, while warning them about sexual sin, he writes: “For this is the will of God, your sanctification, that you should abstain from sexual immorality.” Not only have they been sanctified, but they need to be further sanctified. They need to know how to possess their bodies in sanctification (v. 4). “For God did not call us to uncleanness but in holiness,” or in sanctification (v. 7). Hebrews 12:14 says: “Pursue peace with all people and holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” Sanctification is not only something that occurred in our conversion, but it is also something we are to continually pursue. So, the word is sometimes used to refer to that which is still ongoing and progressive in the life of the Christian.

The Pattern of Progressive Sanctification

Not only is the word itself sometimes used to refer to something ongoing and progressive, there are passages that describe the Christian life in terms of a two-sided pattern of growth and development. This pattern involves the progressive mortification of sin and the progressive cultivating of spiritual graces and Christ-like virtues. Notice how the Confession references this *pattern* of progressive sanctification. It says that “the whole body of sin is destroyed,” which is definitive sanctification, “and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified, and

they are more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces, to the practice of all true holiness," which is progressive sanctification. Sin has received its mortal blow but the several lusts thereof still war within us. Thus, this progressive sanctification has both a negative and a positive side to it.

First, there is the negative weakening and mortification, or putting to death, of remaining sin. Romans 8:13: "For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." The verb is in the present tense and may be read as, "If you by the Spirit are putting to death the deeds of the body." This is an ongoing activity of dealing with remaining sin. Colossians 3:5: "Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry." Colossians 3:8: "But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth." 1 John. 3:3: "And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself (is purifying himself),²⁵ just as He is pure." 2 Corinthians 7:1: "Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit." The assumption in all of these texts is that there are still remaining sinful tendencies, remaining defilement and corruption, adhering to the believer and this necessitates that we must actively be engaged in cleansing ourselves from that defilement.

Second, there is an emphasis upon the positive enlivening, strengthening and cultivation of every spiritual grace. Again, 2 Corinthians 7:1: "Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit." But it doesn't stop there. We then have the positive, "perfecting holiness in the fear of God." Romans 12:2: "And do not be conformed to this world [that's the negative],²⁶ but be transformed by the renewing of your mind [the positive]." 1 Thessalonians 4:1: "Finally, then, brethren, we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more, just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God." We have this language of process, progression, and growth. 1 Peter 2:2: "As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may *grow thereby*²⁷." 2 Peter 3:18: "*But grow*²⁸ in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." 2 Peter 1:5ff: "giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge; to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love." In all these verses, we clearly see a progressive sanctification that has both a negative and a positive side to it.

25. Parentheses mine.

26. Parentheses in this text mine.

27. Italics mine.

28. Italics mine.

We also saw this when we looked at Romans 6 earlier. In union with Christ, we died to sin and have been raised to newness of life (vv. 1-11). This is definitive sanctification. But it also speaks of progressive sanctification which is based on and grows out of that. “Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin [the negative], but present yourself to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God [the positive]” (vv. 12-13). We see the same the thing in Colossians 3:9-10: “You have *put off the old man* with his deeds... and have *put on the new man*.” This is definitive sanctification. That’s what happened at your conversion. But these indicative verbs are couched on both sides by imperative verbs. Notice the negative aspect in verse 8: “But now you yourselves put off all these: anger, wrath, malice” and so on. Verse 12 gives us the positive: “Therefore as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility” etc.

The New Testament clearly envisions the Christian life as one that involves progressive sanctification after the pattern described in the Confession: “the several lusts thereof are more weakened and mortified, and they are more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces.”

The Means of Progressive Sanctification

This first paragraph also mentions the means by which this progressive work of sanctification occurs in the life of the Christian: “are also farther sanctified, really and personally... by his Word and Spirit dwelling in them.” We have mention of both the instrumental means and the efficient means.

Let’s begin, first, with the efficient means. The term “efficient” means that which makes something effective. The Holy Spirit is the one who causes the work of sanctification in our lives to be effective. It is God alone working in us by the Holy Spirit who sanctifies us. Without the Spirit we can never be sanctified. It is important to understand that. We must never think of holiness as something a man just decides to go in for, something he just decides to pursue of his own initiative and something that he does for himself and acquires by his own natural force of personality or energy. No, it is a supernatural work of God from beginning to end.

Therefore, no one can be sanctified who is not a Christian, who has not been reconciled to God by the death of His Son and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Sanctification is something that begins with the new birth and our union with Christ.

This also reminds us that truth alone will never sanctify a man. It is God by the Holy Spirit who sanctifies us by His truth. His Word is the instrument, but the Spirit is the one who makes it effectual in our hearts. This is why all of our interaction with the Word of God, whether listening to preaching or personal Bible reading and Bible study, must be joined

with earnest prayer for the blessing of God upon it. The Word alone does not sanctify. It is the Spirit who sanctifies.

However, secondly, as the Confession notes, the Word is the instrument the Spirit uses in sanctification. The Word is the *primary* instrumental means. The Word is not the *only* means. God also uses trials to sanctify us.²⁹ But the Word is the primary means through which the Spirit works to enable us to become progressively sanctified. This does not happen in some kind of magical, mystical way through the mere repetition of Scripture verses. Rather, it is by the Word understood, applied and acted upon. This sanctifying Word of God is full of doctrines to be learned and believed, and commands and exhortations to be obeyed. It is also full of exhortations to diligent effort and painstaking exertion in the living of the Christian life.

We do not remain passive as the Spirit sanctifies us. Rather, He so works in us that we also work. His work in us is evidenced by our diligent application of ourselves to His Word and to what it tells us to believe and commands us to do. His work does not preclude our working. In sanctification the Spirit works and we work. His promised work in us is the basis of our hope of success in the pursuit of holiness. Our work in applying ourselves to God's Word, learning what we are to believe concerning God, and what God requires of us and seeking to do it, is to be the focus of our deliberate effort. They are concurrent realities in the progressive sanctification of the Christian.

Its Necessity

Sanctification is not an option. It is a necessity. The paragraph ends with these words, "without which no man shall see the Lord." This is a quotation from Hebrews 12:14: "Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord." This sanctification, initial and progressive, is a mark of a true Christian. If we are not pursuing holiness in our lives as defined and described by the Bible, we will be lost in the end. We do not earn salvation by sanctification, but salvation is evidenced in us by and through our sanctification. Indeed, sanctification, like justification, is an essential aspect of true salvation. Therefore, where there is no sanctification, there is no salvation. Does this mean, then, that unless we are perfectly holy and sinless, we are not saved? No, and this leads us to the subject of the next paragraph.

Paragraph 2: The Imperfection of Sanctification

This paragraph begins by asserting that sanctification is "throughout the whole man." It is not that our mind is sanctified but our affections, wills and our bodies are not. Rather, the whole person of the Christian has been definitively sanctified and is being progressively sanctified.

29. See, for example, Psalm 119: 67, 71; Romans 5:1-4; 2 Corinthians 4:17-18; James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 1:6-7.

This assertion then leads to the main emphasis of this paragraph. Though sanctification in Christ affects our entire being, “yet” it is “imperfect in this life” and “there abideth still some remnants of corruption in every part.” Here we have the reality of remaining sin in the Christian. Of course, this is already implied by the whole concept of progressive sanctification. If it is progressive, it is not yet perfect. Then the Confession describes the consequence of remaining sin in the believer: “whence ariseth a continual and irreconcilable war; the flesh lusting against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh.”

Remaining Sin in the Believer

This paragraph opposes the fallacy of any form of Christian perfectionism. Sanctification is “imperfect in this life; there abideth still some remnants of corruption in every part.” Though we as believers have died to the *reign* of sin, we still must constantly deal with *remaining* sin. There is always room, and there is always need, for further growth and development. The mortifying of sin and the cultivating and strengthening of Christ-like virtues is a never-ending process until we are glorified in the world to come.

There have been those in the history of the church who have taught that a Christian can arrive at entire sanctification in this life. There are groups who teach that Christians, or at least some Christians, either no longer commit sins, or they no longer have a sinful nature. There are also those who teach that you can receive justification and then sometime later you may receive sanctification as an entire and complete package. They say there is no such thing as progressive sanctification. You are either sanctified or you are not, and if you’ve received sanctification, you no longer sin. The Confession opposes any such teaching as contrary to the Scriptures.

The latter part of Romans 7 is the classic text addressing the reality of remaining sin. Paul addresses this when he writes: “For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me” (Rom. 7:19-20).

Consider, too, the apostle John. He is the very disciple who leaned on Jesus’ breast; the disciple whom Jesus loved; the disciple who was, in a certain sense, closest to our Lord, a man who was there when the Holy Spirit came down in power on the day of Pentecost. He was a man full of the Holy Spirit.

It was this same John who said, (and notice he uses the plural pronoun including himself in what he says): “If *we* say that we have no sin, [no sinful nature, no indwelling sin] we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). In verses 9-10 he says: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, [have committed no acts of sin],³⁰ we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.” John wasn’t

30. Parenthesis mine.

saying this to encourage believers to sin and not be troubled about it. In the very next verse he says: “My little children, these things I write to you so that you may not sin.” John was not making light of sin as though it doesn’t matter. He was simply acknowledging the fact that sin is still a part of the Christian’s experience in this life. More importantly, he is arguing that if you are a true Christian you will be painfully aware of this reality. Those who say they have no sin deceive themselves, he says, and the truth is not in them.

This is the same John who, in this same epistle, also taught the doctrine of definitive sanctification. He could say in 1 John 3:9 that, in one sense, Christians do not commit sin. Specifically, in the context of the concerns of this letter, they do not apostatize from devotion to Jesus Christ as the Son of God who has come in the flesh.³¹

But he also makes it clear here in the first chapter of his epistle that he does not mean that Christians have no more remaining sin. Sin no longer reigns, but it still remains so that every Christian finds the need to still repent and confess sin the rest of his days. And every Christian, as he says also in 1 John 2:2, is still in need of an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous who is the propitiation for our sins. This is so not only for the sins we commit before we are converted, but for those sins we struggle with even after we have become Christians.

Now this teaching should guard us from two extremes: Pharisaism on the one hand, and despair on the other. When men try to advocate a doctrine of Christian perfection, they tend to accommodate their understanding of sin to fit their doctrine. Sin is defined as something less than it actually is. So, they focus on outward sins and become blinded to the sins of the heart, sins of thought and attitude, and the depth of the corruption that dwells within them. Their error blinds them even to those visible sins that are more subtle and refined. Therefore, such an understanding of sanctification tends to produce self-deception and pride—a kind of Pharisaism.

At the other extreme, Christian perfectionism tends to produce despair in the heart of the truly sincere and humble child of God. He sees so much sin still clinging to everything he does and sees himself still falling so short of what he ought to be. Therefore, he is caused to feel that he must be some kind of second-class Christian who hasn’t discovered *the secret* of the deeper Christian life. Or, he’s caused to doubt whether he is a Christian at all. But we must remember that our sanctification is never entire and complete in this life; it is progressive. This fact exposes the fallacy of any form of Christian perfectionism.

Conflict in the Believer

After mentioning the reality of remaining sin in the Christian, the Confession then describes the consequences of remaining sin in the believer: “whence ariseth a continual and irreconcilable war; the flesh lusting against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh.” There is

31. See 1 John 2:18-23; 4:1-3, 13-16; 5:4-5, 16-18.

struggle and conflict in the Christian life. This is not a bad sign. This is not a sign that a person is not a Christian. This is one of the evidences that you are a Christian. John Murray said:

If there is remaining indwelling sin, there must be the conflict which Paul describes (for example) in Rom. 7:14ff. It is futile to argue that this conflict is not normal. If there is still sin in any degree in one who is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, then there is tension, yes, contradiction in the heart of that person. Indeed, the more sanctified the person is, the more conformed to the image of his Savior, the more he must recoil against every lack of conformity to the holiness of God. The deeper his apprehension of the majesty of God, the greater the intensity of his love to God, the more persistent his yearning for the attainment of the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus, the more conscious will he be of the gravity of the sin which remains and the more poignant will be his detestation of it. The more closely he comes to the holiest of all, the more he apprehends the sinfulness that is his and he must cry out, "Oh wretched man that I am" (Rom. 7:24).³²

There are types of holiness teachings and deeper life teachings in evangelical churches that say otherwise. Essentially, they argue that if you are a Christian seeking to live a sanctified Christian life, and you find that you are consciously struggling, laboring, wrestling, fighting, and resisting, you have grieved and quenched the Holy Spirit. You haven't yet learned the secret of victory in the Christian life. They say the trouble with so many Christians is they remain ignorant of this secret. Therefore, they go on fighting and struggling with remaining sin and striving to be holy. What they must do is simply, "let go and let God, and rest by faith in the arms of Jesus and let the Holy Spirit take over." Then, all the struggle will be gone.

Evidently the apostle Paul, and all the other apostles and New Testament writers, were also ignorant of this "secret," because throughout the New Testament, the language of conflict is used to describe the nature of the Christian life. It is language of diligent exertion, struggle, and even violence at times. "Pursue holiness without which no man shall see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14). "If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live" (Rom. 8:13). "Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body" (Rom. 6:12). Put off this, put on that. 1 Timothy 6:12: "Fight the good fight of faith." Hebrews 12:4: "You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin." The implication is that living a holy life might come to that. This is vigorous language: conflict, struggle, exertion, plucking out the right eye, cutting off the right hand. Progressive sanctification is depicted as a real battle and spiritual warfare.

Does this mean that the Christian is doomed to abject failure? Does it mean that the child of God can never make any real progress in holiness? No! As we've seen, every Christian has been definitively sanctified. There has been a fundamental break with his old life under the dominating power of sin and the beginning of a new life of devotion to Jesus Christ.

32. Murray, *Redemption, Accomplished and Applied*, 144-45.

This definitive sanctification is not perfect. The Christian is not sinless. It's not a matter of perfection, but there has been a change of direction.

Furthermore, having been definitively sanctified, the Christian is being progressively sanctified, although not perfectly sanctified in this life. He or she will always battle with remaining sin. But, at the same time, the true Christian will not ultimately be destroyed. In the conflict he will never apostatize and he will grow and increase in Christian virtue. This is the emphasis of the third and final paragraph of this chapter of the Confession.

Paragraph 3: The Certain Progress of Sanctification

A Progress That May Sometimes Experience Setbacks

"In which war, although the remaining corruption for a time may much prevail..." Consider the experiences of Noah falling prey to drunkenness, Abraham lying about his wife Sarah and putting her in danger, Moses striking the rock, David falling into adultery, as well as covering his sin and delaying repentance for a time, and Peter denying the Lord and giving way to the cowardly fear of man. These are all examples of true believers in whom, for a time, remaining corruption prevailed.

A Progress That Will Ultimately Not Be Thwarted

In all the examples just given, none of these saints remained in such a sad spiritual condition indefinitely. Each one of them eventually repented and renewed their faith and devotion to God. It is possible to lose a battle without losing the war. When walking up a long stairway, one may fall or even slide back a few steps, but still persevere and advance toward the top. Sometimes sanctification can give the same appearance of halting progress. But as the Confession goes on to say, "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."

The Agent of this Progress

It is through the continual supply of strength from the sanctifying Spirit of Christ who indwells every believer that the believer is enabled to overcome.

The Essence of this Progress

The Confession says, "and so the saints grow in grace." This is a concise way of describing progressive sanctification. The language is taken from 2 Peter 3:18: "but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." Growing in grace is a common way of describing the gradual increase of those holy virtues that God works in His people through the indwelling Christ.

The Characteristics of this Progress

What does this growing in grace involve? The Confession mentions three interrelated characteristics.

First, it involves “perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1). In other words, it involves becoming increasingly separated from sin and devoted to God in a spirit of godly fear. To the Christian, the fear of God is not that dread of God that marks the unbeliever and causes him to run from God or to try to suppress God’s voice in general and special revelation. Rather, the Confession is referring to a gracious fear of God which is one of the most common ways true godliness is described in the Bible. It is a fear of God that is joined to trust in our Father’s love and care for us in Christ, which at the same time counts our Father’s frown as our greatest dread and His smile as our greatest joy. We pursue holiness without and within not to impress men, but because we fear God who sees and knows every thought and intent of the heart and because we desire to honor and to please Him who loved us and gave His Son to redeem us.

Second, the Confession says, “pressing after an heavenly life.” This progress in sanctification involves seeking to live on earth as a pilgrim-citizen of heaven, with your affections set upon heaven and seeking to do the will of God on earth as it is done in heaven.

Third, the Confession says Christians do this “in evangelical obedience to all the commands which Christ as Head and King in his Word hath prescribed them.” This third characteristic might appear simply to be a part of the second. However, there is a comma between the two, so I mention it separately.

What is *evangelical* obedience? This is common language found in the Puritans but it’s a concept rarely heard of today. What does it mean? The term “evangelical obedience” includes several important ideas. It is obedience growing out of faith in the gospel, as opposed to a legal obedience that is seeking to obtain salvation as a reward of our efforts. It is obedience that arises from a regenerate heart and is, therefore, marked by a sincere desire to honor and glorify God and our Savior Jesus Christ. And finally, it is an obedience that, though it is not perfect, is also not satisfied with anything less than obedience to *all* that Christ’s commands. As the Confession says it aims after obedience “to all the commands which Christ as head and King in His Word hath prescribed them.” This is often referred to as *universal obedience*. Universal obedience is not perfect, sinless obedience. Rather, it is *evangelical obedience* which aims for complete compliance to *all* that Christ commands.

This last paragraph teaches that in spite of all the ups and downs and conflict of the Christian life, and in spite of the fact that a Christian may backslide for a time and that remaining corruption may prevail, yet every true Christian will, ultimately, over the course of his life, make progress in sanctification by means of the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit in his heart. Holiness will continue to be perfected in a climate of godly fear. He will continue to press after a heavenly life. And over time, he will grow

in evangelical obedience to all the commands of Christ as he becomes aware of them. Some will make greater progress than others. But all of God's true people will ultimately be found in the way of pursuing that holiness "without which no man shall see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14).