

Fourteen Theses on the Doctrine of
SANCTIFICATION

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1. ***Sanctification is that saving work of God's grace by which he sets a person or group apart for his exclusive use.*** Each Testament of Scripture has essentially a single word group covering the concept of sanctification and holiness. The basic meaning is “to set apart,” indicating something removed from common use and completely dedicated to the service of God. This is something of a binary concept. Something is either completely dedicated or not.
2. ***Sanctification is a definitive work of God, a change of status imparted by God's laying claim to his people.*** People can be described as holy or sanctified when God sets them apart to belong to himself. As David Peterson writes in *Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness*, “A common factor in the three terms describing Israel's vocation in Exodus 19:5-6 (‘my treasured possession’, ‘a priestly kingdom’, ‘a holy nation’) is the note of *separation* from the nations, so as to be uniquely at God's disposal.” God accomplished this separation by redeeming Israel from slavery in Egypt, establishing his unique covenant with them at Sinai, and bringing them into possession of the Promised Land. This definitive concept of sanctification is carried forward in the new covenant where it is grounded in the sacrificial work of Christ. Hebrews 10:10 puts it plainly: “By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” Paul addresses the Corinthians as “those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus.” Both of these uses are in the perfect tense, indicating an accomplished work of God in the believer. The

New Testament's use of the word *saints* (holy ones) for all believers in Christ also reinforces the concept of definitive sanctification.

3. ***Sanctification has an already-not yet aspect.*** 1 Thessalonians 5:23 says, “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” This text clearly indicates a final setting-apart of the believer which is to occur at the second coming (see also 1 John 3:2).
4. ***Sanctification is an aspect of salvation and, therefore, should never be described as a work of man.*** In 1 Corinthians 6:11, Paul describes the conversion of the Corinthians using the terms *washed, sanctified, and justified*. “[God] saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace” (2 Timothy 1:9). The book of Hebrews describes this saving work as a cleansing of the conscience (Hebrews 9:14, 10:22). “A life of dedicated service or worship results,” Peterson writes, “Consecration as a human response is made possible by God’s initiative through his Son, cleansing us and consecrating us for eternity.” As Paul wrote to the Philippians, “it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13).
5. ***The present work of sanctification, therefore, must always be framed as an application of our definitive sanctification, grounded in the gospel, and appropriated by faith.*** Perhaps the best biblical example of this principle is found in Romans 6. In this text, practical sanctification—practicing righteousness and avoiding sin—is grounded in the believer’s union with Christ in his death and resurrection. On that basis, the Christian is called to merely *recognize* his *existing* slavery to God and present himself to God as an instrument of

righteousness. “Sanctification is about being possessed by God and expressing that distinctive and exclusive relationship by the way we live” (Peterson).

6. ***Even “progressive” sanctification is definitive.*** In Romans 12:1, Paul repeats his exhortation to believers to present themselves to God: “Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.” All of the language of this verse supports the idea that the very essence of the Christian life is radical availability—another word for sanctification. The word *present* means to place something at someone’s disposal. Worship is the believer’s agreement, or confession, *by faith* with the sanctification *he already possesses* through his union with Christ. Paul’s admonitions to put off the old man and put on the new (Eph 4:22-24, Col 3:9-10, Rom 13:14) also carry this concept of recognizing an *existing* reality *by faith* and so to live in it.

The commandments of Scripture provide essential direction to available believers. Having presented himself to God, the Christian has obligated himself to obey the commandments of God. In his commentary on Romans, Thomas Schreiner writes, “The commandment defines life in Christ as Christ-like thoughts, words, and actions, i.e., it defines the life we now live by faith in the Son of God (Gal. 2:20).” It is essential that the law of God take its proper place in order to avoid the hazard of self-righteous moralism. Sanctification is not primarily about ethics, but about ownership or identity. Sanctification *has* ethics, but it is not about ethics. Belonging to God entails certain ethical obligations, but it is the belonging that is most important. Self-righteousness or legalism might be defined as skipping over the belonging to get at the commandments. Sanctified people obey, but obedience is not the same thing as sanctification, and sanctification is *never* the result of obedience.

7. ***The obedience of the sanctified life depends on the ministry of the Holy Spirit.*** “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh” (Gal 5:16). Commenting on Romans 7:13-25, Schreiner notes, “When believers contemplate *their own* capacities, it is clear that they do not have the resources to do what God demands. In encountering God’s demands, we are still conscious of our wretchedness and inherent inability.” The flesh is powerless to obey God. Paul spells out the solution to this problem in the next chapter:

So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God (Rom 8:12-14).

The Spirit guides the believer in his correct understanding of the biblical gospel (John 14:26, 16:13, 1 Cor 2:12-16, 1 John 2:27) and focuses his attention to and appreciation of Christ (John 15:26, 16:14). In these ways, he kindles the Christian’s love for Christ, and thus produces obedience to the commandments of Christ (John 14:15, 21, 23). Thus, the righteousness produced in the life of the Christian is *always*, again I say, *always* the alien righteousness of Christ, never “a righteousness of my own” (Phil 3:9).

8. ***Sanctification is progressive only in the sense that Christians progress in their experience and outward demonstration of their definitive sanctification.*** Presenting oneself by faith as a living sacrifice is a daily, even moment-by-moment, service of worship. Jesus said, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me” (Luke 9:23). The writer to the Hebrews defines the mature as those “who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil” (Heb 5:14). Sanctification should not be confused with spiritual growth, though it should result in growth. Our part in growth is one of ongoing repentance, which is nothing more than bearing

in mind our sanctified status in Christ and walking in it. As we submit ourselves to the renewing of our minds, we are transformed by the Spirit so as to become wise in discerning God's will (Rom 12:2).

Sanctification and the Practice of Discipleship

9. *Sanctification cannot be separated from the fellowship of the body of Christ.* The Bible pictures God's setting-apart of his people as a collective, not as unconnected individuals. This is reflected in Peter's use of the national language of Exodus with reference to Christian believers: "But you (plural) are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession" (1 Pet 2:9). In Eph 4:11-16, Christian maturity—including our unity in faith, our emulation of Christ, our doctrinal acumen, our testimony of the word, our effective service, and our love of others—is entirely pictured as the collective enterprise of the Church. As Fergusson observes, "the sanctity of the community takes precedence in important respects over that of its individual members."¹ While the practice of individual disciplines is to be encouraged (1 Tim 4:7), it is not to be seen as a substitute for discipleship in the context of the body.
10. *The proclamation of the gospel is the heart of discipleship.* "Preach the word," Paul exhorted Timothy—all the time to everyone. "As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord," he wrote to the Colossians, "so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith" (Col 2:6-7). Growing in Christ is a matter of trusting in the good news of God's grace in the person and work of Christ just as much as coming to

¹ David Fergusson, "Reclaiming the Doctrine of Sanctification," *Interpretation*. 53, no. 4 (1999): 382.

Christ in the first instance. We do not come to Christ one way and follow him another way (Galatians 3:1-5).

11. ***Worship should be framed in terms of presenting ourselves to God as living sacrifices.*** The Christian life is *always* and *only* one of repentance and faith. The Christian life is *not one of trying harder to be good, but of giving up on one's own effort and trusting in the finished work of Christ.* The ordinance of the Lord's supper is the centerpiece of Christian worship and is essentially a dramatization of the work of Christ on the cross coupled with an invitation for his people to take it in anew. As such, it is a specific occasion for remembering not just the facts of the gospel, but also our union with Christ in his death and resurrection (our definitive sanctification).
12. ***The commandments of scripture must be explicated, but should always and only be empowered by the exaltation of Christ as the object of our faith, hope, and love.*** We need to know the parameters of obedience, but because sin and the flesh are still with us, the temptation to pursue self-righteousness is a constant hazard. The exposition of the word, therefore, must somehow avoid the pitfall of moralism on the one hand, and the pitfall of antinomianism on the other.² The key lies in the exposition and exaltation of the person of Jesus Christ. In Heb 12:1-4, the key to our obedience is "fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and *perfector* of our faith" (emphasis added). In his first epistle, John sets forth the promise of our perfection at the return of Christ: "We will be like him, because we will see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). He then goes on to say that "everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1 John 3:3). When we understand that Christlikeness is

² Warneck, "Notes on Preaching Sanctification," 56.

the prize of life, we are moved to obey. As we observed already from John 14, the love of Christ is the fuel of our obedience.

13. ***Because our growth in Christ is not a matter of our own exertion but depends on the power of the Holy Spirit, we should operate at all times in a posture of prayer.*** In helping Timothy address the serious issues of the Ephesian church, Paul said, “First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men” (1 Tim 2:1). This text, along with Col 4:3 and Eph 6:19, specifically requests prayer for the success of the gospel and the salvation of people. This prayer is doubly effective because it not only bears the fruit of new converts, but also restores the gospel as the focus of the attention of the one who prays. In my experience, the prayers of most church groups focus on soliciting God’s help with life’s difficulties; the prayers of Paul in the New Testament provide an excellent counter-example. He prays, among other things, that people will grow deeper in their personal knowledge of God (Eph 1:15-23), that they will gain a true understanding of the magnitude of the love of Christ (Eph 3:14-21), that they will reflect that love more effectively to others (Phil 1:9-11), and that they will be enabled to discern and walk in God’s will (Col 1:9-14). Paul understood what Christian disciples really need.
14. ***Understanding the definitive nature of sanctification and properly relating it to Christian life and growth has the effect of simplifying our concept of discipleship.*** What Christians need is the fellowship of the body, the exposition of the word in a Christ-centered fashion, and prayer. Our response is the practice of availability to God, a rehearsal of our being set apart to God. Under the direction of the word and by the power of the Spirit, we can expect to grow in obedience and fruitfulness.

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