

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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SANCTIFICATION AND PERFECTION

by Gary North

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish (Ephesians 5:25-27).

Paul's language leaves no doubt concerning Christ's intention to **cleanse His church**. It also leaves no doubt that Paul was writing for the so-called "Church Age." No dispensational group, even including the groups classified as "ultradispensationalists" (followers of C. R. Stam and the zero-baptism, zero-Lord's Supper spin-off groups), has classified Ephesians as anything except a "Church Age" document.

Christ intends to **sanctify** the church. He intends to make it **holy**. These two words mean the same thing: to **set apart**. Christ sets apart His people from the world—not in history, but **ethically**. He does this through the power of His word. Christ's remarkable public prayer in John 17 spells this out clearly:

I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth. As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth (John 17:15-19).

Both in English and in Hebrew, the word for "sanctify" has the same root as the word for "sanctuary." To clean something morally (*kaw-dash*) means to sanctify it, to make it holy. The sanctuary (Exodus 36:1, 3-4, 6) is the *ko-desh*, a holy place. The sanctuary of God is a place that is set aside for worshipping Him. The sanctified person is the one who has been set aside by God to worship Him. The English word **saint** means the one who has access to the **sanctuary**. The same is true in New Testament Greek. The Greek word for saint is *hagios*. The Greek word *hagiazdo* means to purify, consecrate, set apart, make holy, and sanctify.

So much for word studies. These questions remain. First, how is something or someone sanctified? Second,

is it an instantaneous condition, or it is something developed over time?

Christ's Perfection in History

Jesus Christ was born the Son of God. He did not earn this office; He was born to it. He was not a perfect man who somehow became God; He was a perfect man who was also the incarnate God, one person (for God is a Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost) with two natures: human and divine. This has been the testimony of the orthodox faith since at least the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. There is no need here to defend this theology.

But if Christ was born a perfect human being, why did He have to suffer and die? Because He was our office-bearer. He suffered the punishment that sinful men deserve, so that they can escape it.

He lived a perfect life. While He began perfect, unstained by Adam's original sin, He nevertheless had to work out his perfection in fear and trembling: praying, shedding tears, and doing His Father's will in history. His perfection was a **demonstrated perfection** in history. It was not a perfection beyond history; it was **perfection within the confines of history**. It was perfection that left evidence behind.

And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name (John 20:30-31).

So, Jesus **began** perfect, and He **matured** this perfection. He was no more perfect ethically at His death than at His birth, yet He was required by God to walk the highways of Palestine, performing miracles, confronting His opponents, training His disciples, and then dying on the cross. We dare not say that He was more perfect ethically at His death than at His birth, for perfection is perfection; it cannot be added to. Yet we also dare not deny that His perfection matured in history, giving evidence of what a righteous walk before God should be. Thus, Paul wrote: "Be ye followers of me, even as I am of Christ" (I Corinthians 11:1). Christ, as revealed in the Bible, is the only appropriate model for men to imitate.

For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his

Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren (Romans 8:29).

And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is the good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God (Romans 12:2).

So, Jesus went from perfection to perfection. This is a variation of what Cornelius Van Til calls the "full-bucket problem." God was perfect before He created the world. He did not need the world, as heretical mystics have proclaimed for millennia. A perfect Being has no needs that men can satisfy. Such a Being has no needs other than self-communion. Nevertheless, He created the world for His glory. History pleases God. It does not add anything to Him, but it pleases Him. Thus, Van Til says that we must content ourselves with saying that to the glory of a perfect God (a "full bucket" of glory) is added glory from history ("filling"), yet this historical process of glorification does not add anything to His original glory. God was no less glorious before time began.

We must be content with this apparent contradiction. We dare not say that the creation, and especially man, adds something to God (Western mysticism, e.g., Meister Eckhart), yet we also dare not say that history is irrelevant to God and man (Eastern mysticism, e.g., the concept of *maya*, or the illusion of the material).

So it is with Christ's ethical perfection. He was perfect man and fully God at birth, yet His life, death, resurrection, and ascension were not meaningless. Christ possessed an **original perfection**, yet He also experienced a **historically maturing perfection**. He began with perfection appropriate to an infant; he matured to perfection appropriate to a man.

Sanctification: Both Definitive and Progressive

We all are born in sin, and we all die in sin. Yet some people are saved, while others are lost. How can we make sense of this?

All regenerate people are made perfect in the sight of God through the perfection of Christ which is imputed ("declared") to them. Yet all regenerate people continue to sin.

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9-10).

Here it is again: **cleansing**. We never escape the taint of sin, yet God provides a way for us to cleanse ourselves ethically before Him. Christ's perfection is imputed to us. God declares us "Not guilty!" at the time of our regeneration. Yet He also offers us a way to receive confirmation of that same declaration, day by day, as we sin, confess our sin, and go back to work.

Our limited goal, obviously, is the **steady reduction of sin in our lives**. The ultimate goal is **moral perfection**. Yet we never achieve this in history. All we can do is to **mature** in righteousness. We do not evolve into perfection. We certainly do not evolve into God. But we are supposed to mature ethically in history.

This ethical process is two-fold: definitive ("declared by God from outside history into history") and progressive ("maturing by the grace of God inside history"). The definitive declaration of God—"Not guilty!"—is based on Christ's perfect work in history; God transfers Christ's moral perfection to us at conversion. Without this, we could not enter into God's presence in the heavenly sanctuary, any more than men (except for the high priest once a year) could enter into the holy of holies and live. Yet we are not to "rest on His laurels." We are to **work** on His laurels:

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God. Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:8-10).

Cleansing in History

We now return to the original theme: "... that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish (Ephesians 5:26-27). What can this possibly mean?

What it **cannot** possibly mean is that the church of Jesus Christ will not mature ethically in history. There is progress for the church. In fact, there can be no long-term progress in the world ("common grace") without progress for the church ("special grace"). The world eats the crumbs that fall from the table of the saints. (See my book, *Dominion and Common Grace*.)

While God in all ages has imputed to the church the perfection of Christ—the only basis of its standing before God—it nevertheless matures: ethically, creedally, intellectually, and in every other way. It begins in **principle** without wrinkles, yet it also **develops toward** a condition of no wrinkles. Meanwhile, it has wrinkles.

Will the church **as a collective, covenantal organization** mature unto perfection? Paul says that it will. Will this be sin-free perfection before the return of Christ? John's first epistle says not: there will always be sin and the need for confession. But Paul insists: there will be ethical maturation in history.

What this means is that **Christ's ethical perfection** is imputed to a **collective organization**, the church. The church is **definitively sanctified**, as well as **progressively sanctified**. What happens to each Christian as he matures in the faith also happens to the church as an international collective unit. The basis of both kinds of sanctification is Christ's perfect life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

The church is being progressively sanctified (set apart) and cleansed ethically. Christians must not despair. Though in certain periods of history, it seems as though there is no ethical progress, and sometimes even retrogression, in the life of the church, this historic process is not fundamentally different from backsliding in the lives of the saints. David's example is ours: the end result of confession is rebounding. The goals are maturity and victory over sin.

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