

## **Understanding the Biblical Doctrine of Sanctification**

*-Sam A. Smith*

Sanctification refers to how a redeemed (born again) person is ultimately made “holy” and acceptable to God; it is a necessary part of the salvation process since God’s holiness limits the relationship he can have with sinful men. While some see sanctification as an operation distinct from salvation, in actuality sanctification is an integral component of the salvation process. Salvation doesn’t simply lead one toward sanctification, as if sanctification were a “next step,” salvation involves sanctification, as well as forgiveness, justification, regeneration, union with Christ, sealing by the Holy Spirit, adoption, Spirit baptism, and glorification. Some of the questions we will seek to address in our discussion are: How does God make a believer in Christ holy? Through what operation does sanctification occur? Is each of these operations immediate (direct and instantaneous), or mediate (an indirect process over time)? What is the temporal relationship of each operation to the others, and what part do both God and the individual believer play in each?

Theologians have attempted to explain sanctification from various perspectives. One common approach is to view the believer’s ongoing struggle with sin as owing to the fact that the believer has two natures—a holy (sinless) nature and a sin nature. According to the two nature view, the nature that manifests itself to the greatest extent is the one with which the believer chooses to cooperate. While this model does illustrate the conflict between righteous and sinful impulses that occur within the believer as described by Paul in Romans 7:13-25, it fails to address the key issue in sanctification—how transformation of the believer’s human nature (the totality of his being) takes place. The two-nature view simply lacks enough specificity to be of much use in understanding the ongoing operation of sanctification. Additionally there is considerable ambiguity over what is meant by the term “nature.” If the new (holy) nature is one of the natures and the “sin nature” is the other, then which nature is being transformed? The new nature is already holy and the sin principle cannot be made holy (as indicated in Romans 7:13-25). On the other hand if the unsanctified part of the believer’s human nature is simply under the domination of a sin principle operative within, then while the sin principle itself cannot be made holy, the human nature can, but this leads us back to a single nature. The ambiguity of the two-nature model and the precise identification of the two natures and their relationships leads to some rather fruitless theological discussion that generates little light on the overall sanctification process.

Looking at other perspectives, one common approach is to focus on the “positional” aspect of sanctification, emphasizing that the work of sanctification is essentially a divine work, already accomplished, both declaratively (judicially) and according to the “reckoning” of God, who sees the end from the beginning

and can view the process as complete though it has yet to be completed in time. Support for this view is drawn from 1 Corinthians 1:2; 6:11, and Hebrews 10:8-18. In 1 Corinthians 1:2 Paul addresses the letter he writes, “to the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified [*hēgiasmenois*, perfect participle, denoting a present condition resulting from past action] in Christ Jesus, saints by calling....” In 1 Corinthians 6:11 he says, “...but you were washed, but you were sanctified [*hēgiasthēte*, aorist passive, denoting completed action], but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and in the Spirit of our God.” The grammar of this statement seems to imply that washing (associated with regeneration, *cf.* Titus 3:5), sanctification, and justification (all aorist verbs) occur at the same time. In Hebrews 10:10 the writer says, “By this will we have been sanctified [*hēgiasmenoi*, perfect participle] through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” This is theologically identical to Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 1 and 6. Also in Hebrews 10:14 the writer says, “For by one offering He has perfected [*teteleiōkev*, perfect tense] for all time those who are sanctified [*haiazomenous*, present passive participle, *i.e.*, “those who are being sanctified”]. We see here clearly the two ideas of the “already” and the “not yet.” The idea that God has perfected what is being sanctified seems to have a declarative element (with respect to the judgment of God), as well as a temporal element (with respect to what is reflected in the believer’s present experience).

Another view is what might be termed the “temporal” view, which is organized around the timing of the various operations leading to complete (total) sanctification. According to this view the redeemed person is made holy in some limited (and undefined) sense at the moment of redemption (past), then continues to be sanctified in their present walk, and will be fully and finally sanctified at the appearing of Christ in the future. This too seems to be a valid model, but by itself leaves some questions about sanctification unanswered. For example, the temporal perspective doesn’t specify what part of man is sanctified—when; nor does it give us a clue as to what is involved in the sanctification process itself. Nevertheless, understanding that sanctification occurs within a temporal frame of reference (past, present, and future) is extremely important.

A somewhat existential view emphasizes that when a person is regenerated they are separated from the penalty of sin, then as they grow in their walk with the Lord they are progressively separated from the power of sin, and finally, when they are with Christ in his presence, they will be separated from the presence of sin. This is very similar to the temporal view; only the emphasis is placed on how the believer’s existence is impacted with respect to sin as this overall process is brought toward completion. While this view doesn’t specify what part of the believer (spirit, soul, body) is affected at each stage, it does deal with the state in which the believer exists as the process unfolds.

Finally, a view that might be termed an “objective” view explains that the believer’s spirit is made holy at the moment of salvation, while the soul (including the mind and emotions) are sanctified progressively (though not completely) throughout the Christian life, and last of all the body will experience its sanctification at the appearing of Christ to transform the believer’s body. As is readily apparent, this perspective is very similar to the last two above (the temporal and the existential views) in that it incorporates a temporal element, but in this case the focus is on the believer’s own objective nature (spirit, soul, body).

All of these views in varying ways attempt to deal with the relationship between “what is” and “what is to come,” and they all have some explanatory value—though none is complete by itself. Since it is difficult to build a comprehensive view around abstractions like “time,” “justice,” and “divine reckoning,” it is helpful if we use man’s objective nature (spirit, soul, and body) as the basis of a more integrated view. If nothing else, this might make it easier to conceptualize how some of the elements of the various views fit together. In the following paragraphs we will show how the objective view, which focuses on the sanctification of the human nature, is developed biblically, and then how the elements from the other views can be correlated. (Of course this is only one way of organizing and correlating the numerous observations that have been made about sanctification.)

### **The sanctification of the human nature**

The Bible describes sanctification as occurring in three stages: sanctification of “spirit,” “soul” (heart and mind), and “body;” they are the objects upon which the work of sanctification is performed, and together they comprise the sum total of the believer’s human nature.

#### Immediate sanctification (of spirit)

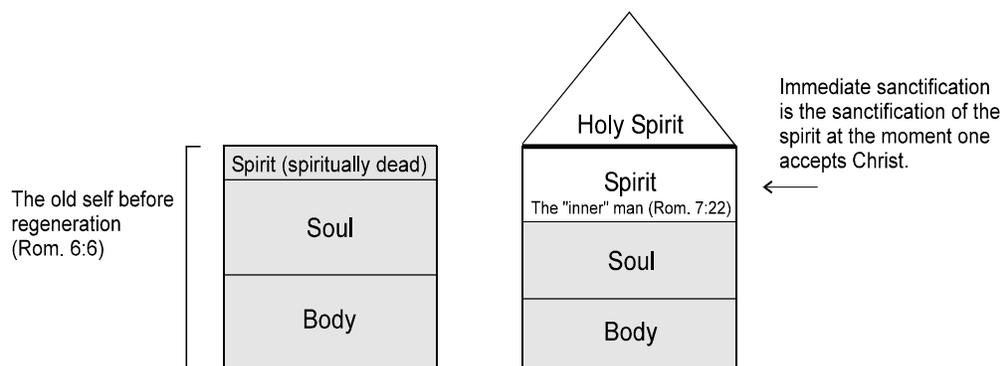
Immediate sanctification refers to the sanctification of one’s spirit the moment they are regenerated. In order for the Holy Spirit to be united with the person who exercises faith in Christ, the believer’s sinful, fallen spirit must be made holy. Remember, sin was the cause of man’s spiritual death (separation from life-giving union with God) in the first place, and in order for that union to be re-established there must be, minimally, a reversal of what caused man’s spiritual death (though certainly more than the minimal is accomplished in redemption). Union with God is predicated upon holiness. When a person is regenerated, they must also be cleansed, not only judicially, but actually. Paul alluded to this aspect of sanctification when he said, “If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness” (Romans 8:10). In Romans 7:14-25 he described the conflict between the already sanctified “inner man” (7:22) and the unsanctified part of his nature (which he termed “the flesh” {vv.14,18,25} or “the bodily members” {vv.23,24} but which we should

understand to include the soul, since the body does not have an independent capacity to make moral choices apart from the heart and mind). He says,

<sup>14</sup>For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. <sup>15</sup>For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. <sup>16</sup>But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good. <sup>17</sup>So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. <sup>18</sup>For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. <sup>19</sup>For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. <sup>20</sup>But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. <sup>21</sup>I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. <sup>22</sup>For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, <sup>23</sup>but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. <sup>24</sup>Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? <sup>25</sup>Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin. [Romans 7:14-25]

The implication is that when a person is regenerated, the spirit is sanctified (Rom. 8:10). This seems to be an instantaneous and final operation. Therefore it appears that when a person is regenerated the human spirit is cleansed and made perfectly holy—which is as holy as it will ever be. Man can contribute no more to the sanctification of his spirit than he can to his own redemption—which is nothing; it is entirely of God. Because this occurs at the moment of regeneration, it is referred to as “immediate sanctification.”

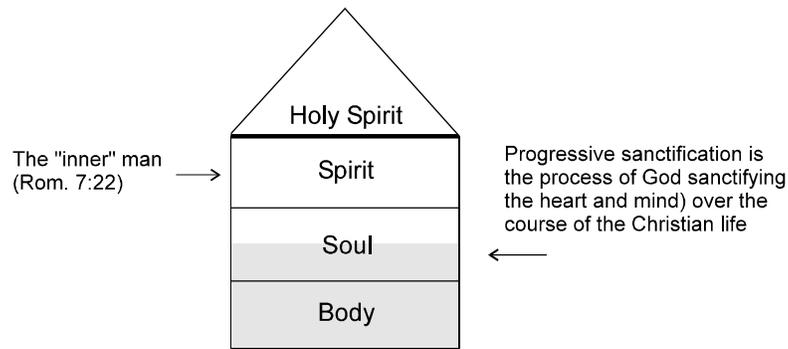
### Immediate Sanctification



### Progressive sanctification

Progressive sanctification refers to the sanctification of the soul (the heart and mind). This aspect of sanctification is not instant as is the case with immediate sanctification; rather it begins at the moment of regeneration and progresses over the remainder of the believer's earthly life. No one reaches a state of perfection in this present earthly existence. Nevertheless, it is God's will that his children be progressing toward holiness as long they remain in this present state. Perhaps the level to which one attains is less significant than the fact that there is continual progress toward the ideal which will be fully formed in us only when we are finally changed by Christ at his appearing. How does God sanctify the heart and mind? He does it through the process of transformation. The sin principle (*i.e.*, evil, *cf.* Rom. 7:21, 23,25) itself cannot be transformed, but its power over the believer can be broken as the human nature is transformed into the image of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18). Paul says in Romans 12:1-2, "I urge you therefore brethren [note the responsibility of the believer], by the mercies of God [*i.e.*, "on account of," or "in view of God's mercy shown to you"], to present [*parastēsai*, aorist infinitive, denoting decisive action] your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship [*tēn logikēn latreian humōn*, "which is your reasonable service" to God—in view of what he has done for you]. And do not be ["be being," present tense] conformed to [*suschēmatisesthe*, "molded into the shape of"] this world, but be transformed [*metamorphousthe*, *i.e.*, reflecting on the outside a profound transformation originating from within—not "molding" by external pressure, but inner transformation] by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect." Paul says that as we assimilate the word of God by faith, we are transformed such that our outer life reflects the renewal within. In progressive sanctification the onus is on the believer, and our progress will depend on our own choices, though we must not forget that God can, and often does bring about circumstances to move us along if we need motivation. Given these facts, we should not be surprised to find that not all believers progress at the same rate or to the same degree. If we choose to live carnally according to the sinful impulses of our fallen nature our progress will be negatively impacted—that was what was happening in the lives of some of the believers at Corinth, *cf.* 1 Cor. 3:1-9 in Paul's day, and it happens to the rest of us to one degree or another, at one time or another). That being the case, it is important to yield ourselves to the control of the Holy Spirit (what the Bible calls, "walking in {"by," or "according to"} the Spirit/spirit," *cf.* Gal 5:16, and being "filled {controlled} by the Spirit," *cf.* Eph 5:18). See also, Rom. 12:1-2; 1 Pet. 1:13-16; 1 Cor. 2:6-16; Eph. 4:11-16, 17-23.

## Progressive Sanctification



Progressive sanctification differs from immediate sanctification since it is a process rather than an instantaneous operation, and also since it depends upon the believer's active participation in that process. We can only assume that whatever is lacking in the sanctification of the soul, which in all cases will be considerable, is completed by God at the death of the believer.

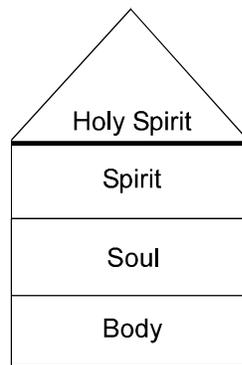
### Final (ultimate) sanctification

Final or "ultimate" sanctification refers to the last stage in the overall sanctification process—the sanctification of the believer's body. This will occur when Christ comes and either resurrects or changes believers, giving them a glorified, eternal body. Since the final sanctification of the redeemed person is an immediate (direct and instantaneous) operation, the believer cannot contribute anything to his final sanctification. Paul alludes to the final sanctification of the believer in Romans 8:18-25 when he says,

<sup>18</sup>For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. <sup>19</sup>For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. <sup>20</sup>For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup>that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. <sup>22</sup>For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. <sup>23</sup>And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. <sup>24</sup>For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? <sup>25</sup>But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.

Paul goes on to describe the actual event that will result in the transformation of the bodies of believers in 1 Corinthians 15:51-58 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, and John says, "...We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is" (1 John 3:2b).

### Final (Ultimate) Sanctification



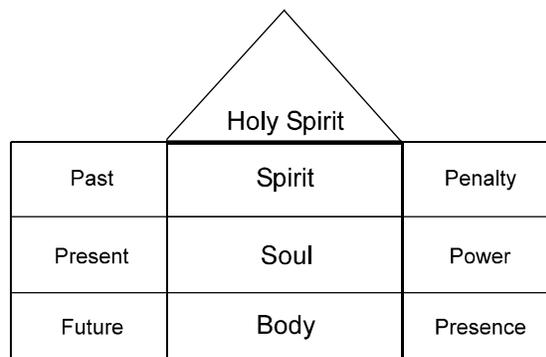
Final sanctification will occur when the redeemed person receives a body suited for eternity at the resurrection (or at the translation, if still alive at the coming of Christ)

The body is the last part of man to be sanctified. Once this operation occurs, the larger process of sanctification will be complete.

### Correlating information from other perspectives on sanctification

As mentioned above, much of the information from the various perspectives on sanctification can be correlated. One possible correlation is as follows.

### Correlation of Some of the Views on Sanctification



When a person is regenerated, their spirit is immediately sanctified. For the one who has placed their faith in Christ this is a past action, and it was at that time that he or she was released from all penalty for sin—past and future. [This should not be confused with “discipline,” which a believer may incur. However, discipline does not involve wrath or eternal punishment, only corrective action from God for the spiritual benefit of his child.] In the believer’s present experience, to the extent that they are being sanctified, they are being delivered from the power that sin, operating through their fallen nature, has over them. At some point in the future every believer will be delivered from the presence of sin—at least the presence of sin within—when his or her nature is fully transformed. Of course God can see the end from the beginning and in some respects chooses to regard his redeemed as though this process were already an accomplished fact, which in fact it is from a declarative (judicial) standpoint. This status the believer enjoys before God is referred to his “position” and his present state as his “experience.”

### **Where to go from here**

We have surveyed the major views on sanctification and how they correlate. This has been largely a conceptual discussion. A more complete presentation of the Christian life should at the very least include a discussion of law and grace; an understanding of the nature of fellowship with God; the nature, purpose, function, and gifts of the Body of Christ; the transforming power of the Word of God; confession of sin and restoration; prayer, and empowerment through the Holy Spirit; and spiritual rewards.

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