

SANCTIFICATION: BACK TO THE FUTURE

(PART 2)

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When I was a young boy and TV had not long been in Australia, our family used to watch (in black and white of course) a show called 'People Are Funny' hosted by Art Linkletter. It was an early version of modern reality shows. Even as a boy I found it fascinating watching the various responses different folks had to humorous set-ups. The whole point was to prove that people are funny!

Now that I am an adult, nothing has changed. People are still "funny". Which is to say, everybody is different. According to early psychological theory, some folks are phlegmatic, others sanguine. Some are naturally choleric, and others melancholic. Just look at Jesus' 'Twelve Disciples' and see how each personality type was represented (indeed necessary to Christ's mission) and added to the rich tapestry of his church. Variety is the spice of life.

So why would I mention this at the beginning of the second part of the theme on sanctification? Well, judging by the responses to the first part, I have to say people are funny! Some loved it, finding it both easy to read and helpful and were going to pass it around to their circle. For instance, Anthony Buzzard the author of many books and editor of *Focus on the Kingdom* wrote approvingly;

Greg ... it seems to me that people use words like sanctification but don't start on the right and only base. You mentioned the wonderful text about "belief of the truth." So right. There is no salvation or sanctification without believing the truth ... But what good is it if people start by NOT believing the Gospel of the Kingdom as Jesus commanded in Mk 1:14, 15? What if people insist on defining God in a way which Jesus did not. How can one be like Jesus if one believes things Jesus never believed! ¹

Other readers were disappointed, feeling I had over-simplified and missed the boat. One wrote;

Greg, I was disappointed in sanctification Part 1. Your view is more mental than spiritual, and seems fabricated according to your understanding rather than the totality of scripture. You speak of sanctification as the teachings of Christ with an eternal view. Yet Christ did not teach sanctification, as sanctification is not possible without the Holy Spirit which had not yet been given. Many of your views are good and wholesome - a Christian must live with eternity in view. But Paul in his epistles teaches the process of sanctification. First must crucify his flesh and self and then pursue a prayerful union with God. Augustine said " One must first empty his vessel of self, so God can fill it with Himself ".

Such "disappointment" leads naturally into part 2 of our subject. Firstly, my view is apparently "more mental than spiritual". For this person my article appeared to concentrate more on head knowledge than life experience. The reader seems to think that I am saying sanctification is a mere matter of intellectual apprehension of propositional truths rather than the daily practice of walking with Jesus using the "means of grace" such as Bible study, prayer, witnessing, fellowship, self-denial, etc.

My answer is that (in agreement with Anthony Buzzard) sanctification starts with "believing the truth". Recall that in *Sanctification: An Eye on the Coming Glory* (Part 1) we saw that God chose us for

¹ I thoroughly recommend all of Professor Anthony Buzzard's books, but notably *The Doctrine of the Trinity: Christianity's Self-Inflicted Wound*; *Jesus Was Not a Trinitarian: A Call to Return to the Creed of Jesus*; and *Our Fathers Who Aren't in Heaven: The Forgotten Christianity of Jesus the Jew*. See his website: www.restorationfellowship.org for more.

salvation through sanctification of spirit and faith in the truth ... through the gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ..." (2 Thess. 2:13-14). Yes indeed. There can be no salvation or sanctification without belief in the truth. The head must comprehend before the heart is changed.

Second, the statement that **Christ did not teach sanctification**, needs addressing. When Jesus said to his disciples, "Now are you clean because of the word which I have spoken to you" (John 15:3), what is this but sanctification? Purification comes by "the word" Jesus has taught!

Do observe that the setting for Jesus' teaching on sanctification here is the parable of the True Vine. If my disappointed friend thinks the process of "pruning" does not involve a daily denial of self, taking up the cross and **pursu[ing] a prayerful union with God** as we seek to daily "abide" in Christ, then I really have missed the boat!

Space forbids me to show again and again that Jesus did in fact teach sanctification. Sufficient for now to point out that at the completion of his ministry on earth the Lord Jesus in summing up his life's work says to his Heavenly Father,

I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.
Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth (John 17: 14-17).

Does anybody really imagine Jesus did not teach sanctification, when he summarises his entire life's work as one that has "given them Your word" so we might be delivered and practically set apart from "the world" to be his followers? What is sanctification if it is not being one with Jesus who says here, "I am not of the world" and therefore, in union with me, "they are not of the world"? What is sanctification --- being set apart as holy unto God --- if it is not being kept "from the evil one"? What is sanctification if it is not living in and by "the truth" which Jesus defines here as "Your word"?

Certainly the apostle Paul believed the whole life, teaching, and redeeming death of Jesus was dedicated to sanctifying a "special people", set apart unto God ...

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to renounce ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of the great God and of our Saviour Christ Jesus; who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for himself a people for his own possession, zealous for good deeds (Titus 2: 11-14).

THUS, TITUS 2:11-14 SUMMARISES SANCTIFICATION SUCCINCTLY ...

The source of everything --- "the grace of God" which "has appeared" in Messiah Jesus.

The teaching ---"instructing us" to renounce the ways of this world and to live godly "in this present age".

The basis on which we are saved --- the redeeming blood of Jesus.

The inspirational means by which it is applied to our lives ... "looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and of our Saviour Christ Jesus".

The purpose of it all --- that we might be His “special people” overflowing with good deeds.

The ultimate goal of God’s grace --- “bringing of salvation to all men”, ushering those who are sanctified into the coming Kingdom for His glory. Like Jesus, Paul says he is ...

A servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of those chosen of God and the knowledge of the truth that is in accordance with godliness, in hope of eternal life that God, who never lies, promised before the ages began, in due time he revealed His word through the proclamation ...” (Titus 1:1-3).

The careful reader will observe it is through “the *knowledge of the truth that is in accordance with godliness*” that God’s promise brings to us the hope of “eternal life” [i.e. the life of the Age to Come]! Knowing God devised this astonishing plan before the world began, and that through His gospel announcement --- “His word” --- we are invited to participate in His eternal purpose, we are filled with an empowering hope to prepare for that Day. ²



OBSERVE ... TITUS 2:11-14 AGREES WITH 2 THESSALONIANS 2:13-14 ... SANCTIFICATION HAPPENS WHEN WE EMBRACE GOD'S PROMISED FUTURE GLORY IN CHRIST BY ALLOWING IT TO SHAPE THE WAY WE LIVE TODAY.

I therefore repeat what I emphasised in part one. The NT Scriptures indissolubly link living godly “in this present age” with our being motivated by “looking for the blessed hope” which is “the appearing of the glory of our great God” when Jesus Christ comes back to earth so we may gain his glory. The power and desire to be holy grows in us as we hug God’s glorious future by faith today. Such a vision inspires in us the spirit of prayer and the spirit of service in the King’s work...

So faith brings the promised future of God’s kingdom back into my present. By faith in the Gospel-promise we taste the power and the glory of that coming age now (Heb. 6: :5). This hope transforms us into our Saviour’s likeness, for “he who has this hope in him purifies himself as He is pure (1 John 3:3). Hope purifies! And purification is sanctification!

² Countless times does the NT link “the word” with the Gospel promise of the hope of “eternal life” in the coming “kingdom of God”. Take your highlighter and check out the equivalence of these terms in passages such as Acts 8: 4-5,12-14, 25, 35; 13:26-49; 14: 1-25. Indeed, whilst you are marking these terms of equivalence, go through the entire book of Acts and highlight every time you read “the word”, “the word of God”, “the word of his grace”, “preaching the gospel”, “proclaiming the kingdom”, “the hope of the promise”, “this salvation” or simply “preaching Jesus” (which means preaching what Jesus taught), and you will be pleasantly surprised how it all agrees with Jesus’ own statement that “the seed is the word of God” or “the word of the kingdom” that brings God’s life and Spirit and power into one’s life (Matthew 13: 19ff; Luke 8: 9ff!).

PAUL'S FAREWELL ADDRESS TO THE ELDERS OF EPHESUS INCLUDES SANCTIFICATION!

In Acts 20 we have the only example in that book of a sermon given by Paul to Christians. Strange as that may sound, it's true! Paul is farewelling the church leaders of Ephesus. He will see them no more. It's a farewell address. Better listen up then. This is going to be critically important.

Paul testifies that night and day he tirelessly, and with tears, worked hard to discharge his "ministry" which he "received from the Lord Jesus" (v.24). Without fear or favour he did not shrink from preaching to them "the whole purpose of God" (v. 27). He summarises that purpose and that preaching as the "gospel of the grace of God" which is none other than "preaching the kingdom" (vs. 24-25).

Note that Paul commends these church leaders "to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among those who are sanctified" (v. 32). Observe that those who are "sanctified" are the ones who believe God's word concerning the coming "inheritance" of the kingdom of God.

At the risk of being repetitive, note the consistent connection between faith in the Gospel-word as having the power to sanctify us for fitness in the future "inheritance" in the coming kingdom. This is why I must respectfully disagree with my disappointed reader. I do not for one minute say that sanctification is merely nice moral teaching on the periphery ... it is the essence of the Gospel of Christ that alone has the power to sanctify us and bring us unto salvation.

Furthermore, my disappointed reader writes, *You speak of sanctification as the teachings of Christ with an eternal view ... [The Christian must] First must crucify his flesh and self and then pursue a prayerful union with God. Augustine said " One must first empty his vessel of self, so God can fill it with Himself.* I suggest this reader fails to understand that the eternal view of the coming glory was that which empowered Jesus himself to take up his own cross and to deny himself;

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:1-2).

Denying himself, Jesus lived a holy life unto God his Father (sanctification!) by emptying himself and taking up his cross. He kept his eye of faith on the Father's word that he would be vindicated --- i.e. raised immortal and exalted to the right hand of God's throne forevermore --- to become the heir of the promised kingdom. Jesus --- the "author and perfecter of our faith" --- brought the future glory back into his own present suffering for it was the prospect of "the joy set before him" that kept him true. So it must be for us.³

Equally puzzling to me, is not only my reader's statement that Jesus did not teach sanctification, but that it was because *the Holy Spirit had not yet been given*. What? Were there no "saints" under the old covenant? Does not Scripture testify for example, that Zecharias and Elizabeth were "both

³ Jesus' favourite self-description was "the son of Man". It was primarily inspired by Daniel's prophetic vision of "the son of Man" receiving the Kingdom of God on behalf of all God's people (see Daniel chapter 7). This was the joy set before him.

righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the LORD”? Is not Joseph described as “a righteous man” (Luke 1:6; Matt. 1:19)? What about old Simeon who was “righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him... (Luke 2:25)? Or Anna whose life of prayers and fasting before God was a paragon of the sanctified and devoted life (Luke 2:36-37)?

Tell me if there is not a more impassioned plea than David’s to be sanctified before his God ...“Oh God, search me and know my heart; try me and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps.139:23-24). Surely this prayer alone proves the old covenant saints knew about sanctification? After his grievous sin, David’s anguish was that God might take His holy Spirit from him (Ps.51:11)!

TIME TO BE PRAGMATIC!

Let’s put the rubber to the road! Let’s scratch where it itches! Let’s see how sanctification is mightily released in our daily experience when we live in light of the values of the future Glory today. You will note my “disappointed” reader said, **that Paul in his epistles teaches the process of sanctification.** I will now demonstrate that a truer word was never written!

The book of First Corinthians written by Paul is a treasure-trove on what the process of sanctification looks like. Paul deals with each and every difficulty that church was encountering by appealing to them to solve their difficulties in view of the coming glory of the future kingdom of God.

Paul reminds the Corinthians they are living in the tension of two concurrent ages, “the now but not yet” ...

Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world (I Cor. 1:20)?

Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age, nor of the rulers of this age who are passing away; but we speak God’s wisdom in a mystery ... which God predestined before the ages to our glory which none of the rulers of this age has understood ... (I Cor. 2: 6).

If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become foolish that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God ... All things belong to you, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come ... (I Cor. 3:18-19, 22).

The form of this world is passing away (I Cor. 7: 31).

These things are written for our instruction upon whom the ends of the ages have come (I Cor. 10:11).

This sampling of texts from First Corinthians proves the Christian mindset works constantly within the tension of the present evil age and the coming future glorious age.

SOULISH OR SPIRITUAL?

Paul says the Christian believer who is not controlled by this understanding is “soulish” (Greek is *psychikos*). The soulish person is one whose outlook is dominated by “the present age.” In contrast, the Christian whose life-orientation is fixed on the Age to Come as one who is *pneumatikos*, that is, “spiritual”. I like the way Bishop Tom Wright expresses this contrast:

The Spirit is the gift of the creator god, coming from the future where the divine plan for the complete new age is already secure (having been made secure ... through the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah); and the Spirit is breaking into ‘the present age’ which still rumbles on, unaware that the future has decisively invaded it. The ‘spiritual’ person is the one in whose heart and mind the living god has worked by the Spirit so that he or she understands the strange new truths of the strange new age, and can see into the mystery, the wisdom which Paul longs to impart ... [T]hose whose minds are illuminated by the gospel know ‘the

mind of the Messiah'. This, by implication, refers to the divine plans, laid up in the Messiah, already unveiled in the gospel but still to be implemented. ⁴

Wright's excellent description of the "spiritual" believer is "that the Spirit of the living God has opened their hearts and minds to receive, and be changed by, truth and power from the age to come." ⁵ In short, the sanctified mind has its eye on the future coming glory that will arrive when Jesus returns. It is a mind with an eschatological outlook. It's impossible to be "spiritual" without this mentality!

This does not mean the journey to that end cannot be dynamic and fulfilling today. We should smell the roses along the way. We are supposed to enjoy God's created world and the physical and social blessings as we pass through this life. We are meant to enjoy our marriage partner and our families. We are meant to appreciate good food. We are meant to revel in a nice sunrise or sunset. We are meant to pat our dogs with enjoyment. We are meant to enjoy a nice swim in the surf, or a day's fishing, or a coffee or nice glass of red with good friends!

But we are not living just for the present. That's what the "soulish" person does. The "spiritual" are marching to the music of another band, heard by faith in the distance. We can already hear the trumpet of the Lord, the voice of the archangel, and hear the roar of the heavenly hosts heralding the coming King. As Wright puts it, we already have the smell of the divine future about us because we are already living by the standards of that coming Glory!

EXAMPLES OF THE SANCTIFIED MIND

Whatever problem beset the Corinthian church, Paul had one standard approach to solving it: Apply the principles and standards and values of the coming Kingdom to the issue(s). Get back to the future! A few salient examples will prove this.

In chapter 5 the matter of sexual impurity in their church is to be handled by excommunicating the offender so that he will be exposed "to Satan". Such discipline would hopefully lead this man to being "saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (I Cor. 5:5). Thus Paul is teaching the church that by bringing the future judgment into the present, this "sinner" can be rescued from a fate far worse than temporal banishment from the church.

In chapter 6 the question of Christians dragging each other before the civil courts is addressed. Paul is incredulous the church seems unable to adjudicate on these 'minor' matters. Since we are going to judge angels and manage the world that is coming, why can't you bring that truth forward and live it now (I Cor. 6:1f)? The kingdom of God is coming! (v. 9, 10). You are going to inherit that Kingdom. Practise that reality now.

In chapter 7 the question of marriage and divorce is treated. What's Paul's answer to all these tricky relationship matters? He says the present "constraints" of this overlapping of the two ages means a deal of stress on our daily lives. So Paul advises that this present world order of marriage and reproduction and 'nuclear' family is passing away. His personal advice --- though he admits it is not a command from the Lord --- is that it's best not to get distracted by all such temporal ties, provided you can live that way, of course. Paul acknowledges this detached celibate life is not for everybody, but he wishes others could live that way in light of the ultimate reality that is coming.⁶

The same applies to the question of foods being offered to idols in chapter 8. The way to address this, says Paul, is to know that the present order of God's world is good, but the Creator intends to renew it;

Recognise where you belong in the eschatological narrative, the Jewish story of the creator's good world and of how it has been redeemed by Messiah. Through that story you must learn how to regulate your apparent rights and freedoms with the overarching responsibilities that are yours because of who and what you are in the Messiah." ⁷

⁴ Wright, N. T. *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. Fortress Press, Minneapolis. 2003. P 282

⁵ Ibid, p 283

⁶ Paul knew Jesus' teaching on this matter of course. Jesus had taught that "in the resurrection" when the saints enter the Kingdom Age, that there will be no marrying and giving in marriage, but we will be as the angels in heaven (Matt. 22:30).

⁷ *Op cit*, Wright, N.T. *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. p292

Another challenge facing the Corinthians was their disgraceful behaviour at the Lord's table [the eucharist or communion] in chapter 11. They were over indulging at their church fellowship meals. Evidently the rich were feasting before the poorer Christians [the labourers and slaves] could arrive after work. This practice was creating social divisions. Paul reminds them how out of character this is with the day when Jesus will preside over the banquet in the New Kingdom Age. There will be nobody left out then. There will be no drunken behaviour there. There will be nobody left hungry there. "As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes." Bring those future realities forward into the present is Paul's consistent call.

Paul is arguing that the Lord's table is a bridge linking the past, present and future. We look back to the death of Jesus and look forwards to the coming glory of Jesus when he returns. In light of the day when we will eat and drink with Jesus in the New Age, we should practice the standards of that Kingdom now. This is to be "spiritual" and not "soulish". This is practical sanctification, energised by the vision of the New Age in the here and now.

Even the famous 'love chapter' 13 is packed full of eschatology. See if you can pick up the emphasis on the coming glory, the now and the then, the imperfect and the perfect;

Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. When I was a child, I used to speak as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. For now we see in a mirror dimly (or as Wright beautifully translates it: "for in the present time we are looking at puzzling reflections in a mirror"), but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully just as I also have been fully known. But now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love (I Cor. 13:8-13).

Once again this famous love chapter must be read within the tension of the overlap of the two ages, "the now but not yet" of the coming Glory. I cannot improve on Wright's exegesis of this thirteenth chapter where he eloquently writes,

[E]ven this exquisite chapter looks forward ... to the final discussion, which will concern the resurrection, the new world that God will make, *and the continuity between the resurrection life and life here and now*. The point of 13: 8-13 is that the church must be working *in the present* on the things that will last *into God's future*. Faith, hope and love will do this; prophecy, tongues and knowledge, so highly prized in Corinth, will not. They are merely signposts to the future; when you arrive, you no longer need signposts. Love, however, is not just a signpost. It is a foretaste of the ultimate reality. Love is not merely the Christian duty; it is the Christian destiny. To hold the Corinthian church together, Paul needs to teach them love; but to teach them love he needs to teach them eschatology.⁸

So even this famous love chapter moves us towards the climax of the book in chapter 15. Nothing we do or suffer for the Lord is in vain. Even death is not the ultimate winner. Christ has been raised as "the firstfruits" guaranteeing a whole crop of new lifers, new agers! All who are asleep in Christ "shall be made alive ... at His coming" (I Cor. 15:20-23).

After we are raised with our immortalised resurrection bodies, "then comes the end [i.e. the goal of God's salvation plan] when Jesus Christ delivers up the kingdom to the God and Father" and when all hostile powers are at last subjected to that one God (I Cor. 15: 24-28). Universal harmony and glory at last.

This is the reason we continue to "be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord" (I Cor. 15: 58). This coming Age of glory is the motivation for our being sanctified unto God. To have this worldview is to be "spiritual" (*pneumatikos*). To have this eye on the future glory of our salvation is to "put on Christ", is to have "the mind of Christ", is to be "led of the Spirit" or whatever other classic ideas come to mind when sanctification is considered.

⁸ Wright, *Op Cit* p 296 (Italics original. Underlining mine.)

FULL CIRCLE

With this brief exposition we are now in a position to answer our original question: What thoughts and images come to your mind with the word sanctification and its cognate “saint”?

We now know that when we believe the truth of the Gospel, that God sets us apart for the salvation we will “gain” when “the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ” finally appears (2 Thess. 2:13-14).

You are a “sanctified saint” (my deliberate tautology!) if the eye of your faith is fixed on God’s promised future Age of Glory as announced by Jesus’ Gospel-word. You are being sanctified if you have already enlisted in God’s programme for the Coming Age, letting its values shape your present living. You know this present world is corruptible and passing away, transient.

Like Jesus, “for the joy set before you” you deny yourself in order to gain the glory of that coming inheritance. You daily bring the future into your present walk. You have your eye on the coming Glory. You know you are a “joint heir with Christ”. Now you are clean by this word which is spoken to you in Christ’s name.

OUR DAILY PRAYER

Knowing these things, may our passionate daily prayer be, “Father, thank you for Your amazing grace You have shown in Your Son in these last days. You are promising us salvation through Jesus Christ. Thank you for the redemption we have through his atoning death. By Your power you have raised him to life guaranteeing our share in his life.

“O Lord God, You have rescued us from this present evil age, and caused us to look for the glorious coming of our Saviour with all the mighty angels of heaven. Father, bring it on! Sanctify us, purify us, fit us to live forever in Your holy Presence. We believe Your word. Fill us with the joy of that New Age of Glory You are setting before us, so that whatever Your Sovereign Hand may prepare for us in this present time, we may have the courage to deny ourselves and live as citizens of that Kingdom.

“O heavenly Father, grant us to abide in Christ Jesus so that when he appears, we may have confidence before him and not be ashamed. May Your will be done in our lives today, as it is in heaven. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the [coming] glory. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.”