A Reformed View of Sanctification

Sanctification by Faith
contrasted with
Anti-nomian Relativism in one extreme
and Neo-nomian Perfectionism in the other

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Introduction: Sanctification by Faith

This paper will argue that the doctrine of Christian sanctification from a Reformed perspective should be understood as sanctification that is accomplished by ongoing repentance and a faith-filled dependence upon Christ. This examination will seek to clearly define what is meant by the term “Sanctification by Faith” and then show its theological foundation. Finally, it will seek to exhibit how this view of Sanctification stands in stark contrast to antinomianism on the one hand and legalistic perfectionism on the other.

Reformers have long affirmed “justification by faith”. In fact this was one of the pillars of the reformation – namely salvation is from Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone. Sola Fide – the Christian is saved by faith in Jesus, not of works. Since this is true, the Christian should continue depending upon the very faith that saved him. As Paul says in Galatians 2:20, “The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

So then, sanctification by faith is built upon the foundation of justification by faith. That is, sanctification is a work built upon the “faith-union” with Christ that the believer enjoys through the completed work of justification. Sanctification then is a continual work of Christ’s Spirit in the believer that is accomplished through a “Faith” relationship with Christ. It is through this relationship, and by the means of grace that Christ provided, that the believer, once effectually called and regenerated, imperfectly grows through the continual supply of strength that comes from the Spirit of Christ, so that the believer matures in dependency upon Christ, growing in grace, growing in love, growing in humility and, being perfected by faith, expresses those resulting fruits that are produced by the Holy Spirit.

Sanctification by Faith is a doctrine that is vigorously affirmed by many reformed thinkers and pastors. In the book Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification, Sinclair Ferguson

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1 The Bible, New International Version
argues that the believer’s union with Christ is central and foundational to sanctification. In *Faith and Sanctification*, Berkouwer affirms faith as the primary apparatus of sanctification. He says, “In the bond between faith and sanctification we perceive, no less than in the bond between faith and justification, the pulse-beat of the Gospel. If faith will but lift its blossoms to catch the sunlight of God’s grace, the fruit will be a life imbued with holiness.” In the Institutes, John Calvin makes it clear that the Christian appropriates the eternal blessings that are his through the Spirit and by the instrument of faith.

Anthony Hoekema chimes in on the nature of faith in Sanctification. He says, “Faith is not only a receptive organ, but it is also an operative power. True Faith, by its very nature, produces spiritual fruit.” John Owen, in The Glory of Christ, probably described Sanctification by Faith better than any other reformer when he wrote, “The only way of receiving supplies of spiritual strength and grace from Jesus Christ, on our part, is by faith. Hereby we come unto him, are implanted in him, abide with him, so as to bring forth fruit. (Christ) dwells in our hearts by faith, and he acts in us by faith, and we live by faith in or on the Son of God. This, I suppose, will be granted, that if we receive anything from Christ, it must be by faith, it must be in the exercise of it, or in a way of believing; nor is there any one word in the Scripture that gives the least encouragement to expect either grace or mercy from (Christ) in any other way, or by any other means.”

It is most plain that those who are Justified by Faith will also exhibit a heart, no matter how weak, that desires to obey Christ, and to live a life of faith that exhibits the fruit of Sanctification, no matter how weak and puny that fruit may be. The Westminster Confession makes this plain when it says, “good works, done in obedience to God’s commandments, are the

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fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith.” So, obedience to God is the proof of a true faith. Justifying faith produces Sanctifying faith. Again, the fruit may be puny. The Confession says that these works are “good” because “they proceed from (God’s Spirit), yet “as they are wrought by us, they are defiled, and mixed with...much weakness and imperfection”. Weak, yes. Imperfect, yes. Defiled, yes. But good works nonetheless. As the night follows the day, the man who has been justified by Christ, shall also be sanctified by Him. He who originates faith in the hearts of men, shall also perfect it.

**Justification and Sanctification: Different Works, the same means**

Now, in saying these things, the reformers are not suggesting that justification and sanctification are the same things. Not at all. At the risk of oversimplification, it may be safe to say that Justification deals with God’s Wrath toward man. Sanctification deals with Man’s Wrath toward God.

To unpack this thought, we see that in Justification, the work of Christ primarily addresses the wrath of God, so that those who are justified by faith have their sins credited or imputed to Christ. The Wrath of God then is completely removed so that there is, as Romans 8:1 asserts, “*now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*” Justification secures unshakeable, eternal favor from God toward the believer. This arrangement, being the gift of God, is appropriated by Faith. Sanctification, therefore, does not deal with God’s Wrath. That has been forever taken care of in the work of Justification.

So then, if Sanctification does not address God’s Wrath toward the believer, then what does it address? This often is very confusing for the believer. If God has forgiven all of his sins, if he has no anger toward him, if he delights in him through Christ, then what is the purpose of Sanctification? According to the reformed view, Sanctification deals not with God’s hostile heart toward man, but rather, deals with the believer’s hostile and idolatrous heart toward God. The believer in Christ has been justified by faith. True enough. The justice of God has been

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6 *Westminster Confession*, Chapter 16, Article 2
satisfied. Again, true. The believer has also been given a new heart. Also true. Yet, the faith of
the believer has not been made perfect. He has much anger, pride, hostility, and idolatry to deal
with. So again, at the risk of oversimplification, in Justification, God’s problem with the believer
has been eliminated. Once and for all, it is finished. However, in Sanctification, the believer’s
problem with God, and with his fellow man, is dealt with in a process that endures over the
entire course of his entire life.

Built upon the foundation of Justification, God eternally and unconditionally loves the
saint of Christ. He has mercifully placed His love upon him and called him ‘his own’. Yet, the
saint does not necessarily always enjoy or embrace this arrangement. In Romans 8, Paul says
that the sinful mind of the believer is often “fleshly” and “hostile toward God.” James says that
we, like spoiled, ungrateful children, quarrel and fight and pray with wrong motives and find
ourselves “hating God” and “even making Him our enemy” (Jas 4:1ff). So then, in this state, the
saint often runs from God, pursues idols, angrily laments in tears and languishes in the desert.
He argues with God, and disagrees with God, and wrestles against God. He accuses God and
finds fault with God. Yet, the true saint of God, the one who has been chosen, and effectually
called, and justified by Christ, over and again, though he struggles mightily against God, also
continually comes to a place of humility and brokenness. This is Sanctification. And it is the
story of every true saint.

It is the story of Job who wants to drag God into court and then repents in sackcloth and
ashes. It is the story Jonah running to Joppa and repenting in the belly of a fish. It is the story
of Jacob wrestling with God and repenting with a broken hip and a new name. It is the story of
David lying and deceiving and then repenting, calling on God to give him a clean heart and a
renewed spirit. It is the story of Peter the fisherman boasting about his love of Christ, yet
resisting the will of Christ, denying Christ and running from Christ, who then repents and
becomes a fisher of men.

In these accounts we clearly observe the faith of each saint being strengthened through
repentance. In sanctification, the believer comes again and again to this posture of bowing, of
repentance, and consequently, to a place of deeper dependence upon Jesus, to a maturing faith, and a growth in holiness. This repentance is not simply ‘external’ compliance but, as Jonathan Edwards might say, it is “a heart affection for Christ.” In Religious Affections, Edwards writes, “With respect to love; it is plain by the Scripture, that persons may have a kind of religious love, and yet (if there is no affection for Christ) they have no saving grace.” So then we see that Biblical sanctifying repentance is a humble and broken turning of the heart’s affections toward God and a loving and willful reconciliation to God’s will that says, “Thy Kingdom come, Thy Will be done, in my life, just as it is in heaven.”

The Relationship of Faith and Repentance in Sanctification

In the scripture, this is the ‘normal’ experience of those who follow after Christ. Repentance is not a one-time act, but continues on and defines the life of the believer. In fact, one might say that repentance is the twin sibling of faith. Turning to Christ in faith always involves a turning away from sin through repentance. Repentance and Faith are the internal instruments of the ‘heart affections’ that Christ uses to transform the believer into His glorious likeness.

The Scripture is filled with passages that demonstrate this sanctifying relationship between faith and repentance. In Acts 26:20, Paul says to Agrippa, “I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.” James says that God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble and later instructs believers to “draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn, and wail. Change your laughter to mourning. Your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.” In Revelation 2:4-5, Christ warns the church at Ephesus, “This I hold against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lamp-stand from its place.” Later in Revelation 3:19-

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20, Christ says to the believers in Laodicea, “Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.”

Calvin affirmed this sanctifying repentance when he described the Christian life as a “race of repentance”, making it plain that repentance should be ingrained throughout the entire life of Christ’s followers. Finally, Martin Luther, in the very first of his 95 theses nailed to the wood of the Wittenberg door read, “Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ...willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance.” In his fourth theses, Luther wrote that this, “true inward repentance...continues until our entrance into the kingdom of heaven.”

We could go on and on, citing one example and reference after another, yet the point is clear: Sanctifying repentance and faith are not the exceptional acts of those who have been justified by Christ, they are the rule. Christians are Justified by Faith in Christ and they are Sanctified by Faith in Christ. Justification and Sanctification are indeed different particular works of Christ, but the internal instruments are the same – repentance and faith – which in both cases are graceful gifts wrought in believers through the work of the Holy Spirit.

**Sanctification by Faith & The Moral Law**

As stated earlier, it is of great importance that believers maintain a proper perspective of the Moral Law, especially as it regards Sanctification and spiritual growth. If they do not, they are susceptible to either Anti-nomian License in one direction or Neo-nomian Legalism in the other. Generally speaking, believers often err in one of these two extremes. So it rests upon the Pastors and Elders of any given church to maintain and promote a gospel-oriented “Sanctification by Faith” view. If the leadership fails in establishing this proper approach, the church will begin to falter – becoming either a licentious, morally nauseating church that mocks the power of the Cross in overcoming sin (Rev 3:16), or a pharisaical, legalistic church that glorifies fleshly self-

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8 Calvin, *Institutes*, 601.
effort and forsakes the love of Christ (Rev. 2:4). In the three following divisions I will seek to describe what I mean by Anti-nomianism, Neo-nomianism, and Sanctification by Faith.

**Anti-nomianism:**

*Denying the Relevance of the Moral Law and Promoting Moral License and Relativism*

The first extreme, Anti-nomianism – claims that Christians are exempt from any obligation to obey the moral law. These would argue that there is no necessary connection at all between justification and sanctification. Justifying Faith itself is often reworked so that faith is seen through the Gnostic lens of mere intellectual assent to the Gospel. Faith is “agreeing” that the Gospel is true, not “trusting” that it is true. Trusting Christ in repentance and faith is optional. Rational assent is primary. With this view of justification, ongoing repentance, faith, and obedience becomes immaterial and sanctification becomes an unnecessary doctrine.

Of course, this is an extreme view of Anti-nomianism. There are others, less extreme, who admit the necessity of faith and repentance in justification and therefore allow Calvin’s first use of the law. These would admit that the law is necessary to reveal sin and to tutor the elect to Christ. They may also make some allowance for the second, civil use of the law in restraining evil. However, they would totally deny the third, didactic or Moral use of the law. This rejection of the third use of the law, however, creates a ‘functional’ Anti-nomianism. Obedience to Christ becomes nebulous, vague, indistinct, and individualistically defined. Nothing can be functionally held up to morally reject the statement, “Jesus told me to do this” or “the Spirit led me to do that.”

Without the moral law to guide and urge the believer, Biblical obedience is effectively negated. While giving lip service to scripture, the believer can become a law unto himself, doing what is right in his own eyes, with no objective ‘law’ to guide him. The believer becomes a traveler without a map. The Holy Spirit may empower the believer to obey, but with no
reference point for obedience, the functional Anti-nomian becomes aimless and driven by any wind of doctrine. Therefore, in order to guard against this temptation toward Anti-nomianism, the reformed view of Sanctification draws a strong distinction between “trusting faith” and “intellectual assent”, as well as unequivocally asserting the third use of the law. When this happens in a church, the gospel is no longer seen as a power agent to forgive and eradicate sin. Rather, the gospel becomes nothing more than a “get out of jail free” card. It goes without saying, that this perspective will quickly begin to disease the believer and inoculate him from feeling any sense of proper guilt or conviction in regards to sin and the power of the gospel is lost.

**Neo-nomianism:**

**Diminishing the Magnitude of Moral Law and Promoting Fleshly Striving**

On the other hand, there is a definite danger in the opposite extreme. As we have seen, the Anti-nomian denies the proper uses of the law so that obedience becomes arbitrary and nebulous. The legalistic perfectionist, however, moves in a different direction. Like the unbelieving Pharisees of old, the legalist makes up his own version of the law, and as a result diminishes it into mere external “rule keeping”. As a result, he is no longer upholding the law of God, but rather extolling a perverted modification of the law that emphasizes an adherence to 'religious' practice.

The legalist truly finds himself in an odd posture. He may truly feel as though he is exalting God’s law, when in truth, he is subversively ripping the very heart out of God’s moral commands. Instead of urging and giving shape to obedience by faith, the legalist becomes a near-sighted forest ranger who counts pine needles while ignoring the fact that he is standing in the Redwoods. He becomes a policeman who writes tickets for jay walking while denying that he himself is a murderer. So then, the legalistic perfectionist is a functional “Neo”-nomian. He is not “anti-law”. But he is not “pro-law” either. He is in fact a proponent of “false-law”. While the Anti-nomian turns away from faith and repentance and turns to mere ‘intellectual assent’ or
‘warm feelings’, the legalist turns away from faith and repentance and turns to ‘fleshly striving’ and ‘self-effort’. He writes new laws, sham laws, and then intensely attempts to perfectly keep them. He doesn’t stop there. He imposes these laws on others, making himself arresting officer, judge, and jury – ready to pounce on those who offend his fleshly code of conduct. Of course this fosters every kind of pride and hubris. The perfectionist wears his reputation and accomplishment on his sleeve. He compares himself to others. He is even tempted to hold his record up before God as a means of incurring favor. He is keeping the rules and God should notice. He is producing fruit – fruit that may look genuine to himself and may even be appealing to others – but in the end, it is fleshly fruit that poisons the soul. The legalist creates big bundles of pseudo-law and lays it on the backs of others. He kneels beside others in prayer and says, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men (Luke 18:11-12).” He diminishes God’s Law, extols his own personal law, and then exalts himself as a faithful son that God is obligated to bless.

Christian musician, Derek Webb, sarcastically describes the life of the Neo-nomian in his song, “A New Law”...

"Don’t teach me about politics and government; just tell me who to vote for
  Don’t teach me about truth and beauty just label my music
  Don’t teach me how to live like a free man just give me a new law
      I don’t wanna know if the answers aren’t easy
      so just bring it down from the mountain to me
      I want a new law i want a new law gimme that new law
  Don’t teach me about moderation and liberty I prefer a shot of grape juice
  Don’t teach me about loving my enemies don’t teach me how to listen to the Spirit
      Just give me a new law
      What’s the use in trading a law you can never keep,
      For one you can that cannot get you anything
      Do not be Afraid, Do not be Afraid, Do not be Afraid, Do not be Afraid...”

Consider the weight of this error. Sanctification for the Neo-nomian, is not by faith. It is ‘striving in the flesh’. It ignores sins of the heart. Lustful action is emphasized over lustful thought. Anger is rationalized. Religious idolatry is overlooked. Impatience is trivialized. Jealousy and envy are excused. Racism and cynical put downs are accepted. As long as the Neo-nomian keeps his personal-external record clean, as long as he is keeping his own rules,
then he feels himself to be loved by God. Yet, when the perfectionist's goals are blocked, when something or someone gets in the way of his rule keeping, then self-righteous indignation pours out from him and is heaped on those who have caused the flaw. When he fails. He blames. He blames others. He blames God. He blames himself. Hell hath no fury than a perfectionist who has failed to keep his own standard. At this point, instead of turning to faith and repentance, instead of turning to Christ, the Neo-nomian simply applies himself to Trying Harder. He recommits himself to Fleshly Striving. He makes up new rules to prop up the old ones and he constantly amends his new-law constitution to make it more manageable.

**Sanctification by Faith:**

**Extolling the Law and Extolling the Gospel**

In contrast to both extremes, those who hold a “Sanctification by Faith” view are truly able to be completely “pro-law”. They do not view Christian growth as a product of Trying Harder for Christ, but rather of Trusting More of Christ. By faith, they are able to observe God’s Law without feeling themselves to be condemned by it. They are able to delight in the law of God because the Gospel frees them to do so. God’s law, through the Gospel and the Spirit’s work, can penetrate the heart of the believer without causing fear or shame or anger. Sanctifying faith allows the believer to gaze at the law of God, even as he gazes at Christ, knowing that as he humbles himself in repentance, God is faithful and just to forgive him. The believer does not view the Cross as a "crutch for a cripple", but as a "wheel chair for a quadriplegic". Sanctification is not a process of becoming stronger and needing Christ less, it is becoming weaker and needing Christ more. Sanctification is understood as a growth in Christ Dependence – trusting, leaning, abiding, resting, reclining – these are the words that the scripture uses to describe the Christian’s relationship with Christ. With this in mind, the believer can be confident that the Spirit will appropriate obedience, writing the law of God upon his heart, and producing the fruits that come from faith in Christ.
In conclusion, we must consider that Sanctification by Faith is the *only* legitimate way to uphold God’s Moral Law and to pursue a life of Christian obedience and love. Anti-nomianism stands outside the reformed view because it rejects God’s moral law and subjugates faith and repentance in favor of “moral relativism”. Neo-nomianism (or legalistic perfectionism) stands outside the reformed view because it diminishes God’s moral law and subjugates faith and repentance in favor of “moral striving”. So then, it seems that Sanctification by Faith best upholds the reformed teaching of Sanctification found in the Westminster Confession of Faith:

*They who are effectually called and regenerated, having a new heart, are further sanctified through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection; by His Word and Spirit dwelling in them, the dominion of sin is destroyed, lusts are weakened and mortified, and graces are strengthened. This sanctification is in the whole man, yet imperfect in this life, there abiding still some remnants of corruption in every part; the flesh fighting against the Spirit, and the Spirit fighting against the flesh. Yet, through the continual supply of strength from the sanctifying Spirit of Christ, the regenerate part overcomes; and the saints grow in grace and holiness that is perfected in the faith-filled fear of God.*

- *WCF, Chapter 13 (my paraphrase)*