

SANCTIFICATION BY FAITH:

*A continual work of the Gospel
that produces ongoing hope filled repentance
and a growing dependence upon Christ*

A Paper

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INTRODUCTION: SANCTIFICATION BY FAITH

Bill and I sat in the coffee shop hidden away in the corner. He was distraught. He was a young pastor, fresh out of seminary. He had been equipped, trained, and ordained to lead his church, but still he struggled with a nagging theological confusion. He picked at his breakfast as we talked, but food was obviously not his greatest concern.

"You know Tim. I think I understand justification pretty well. I understand that, because of Christ's work on the cross, and his grace in my life, God has forgiven all of my sin and declared me completely righteous through the justifying work of Christ. That's the Gospel. I get it. But, here's the thing: What does that have to do with me now? And what does that have to do with the saved people in my church? You know what I mean? What does the Gospel have to do with sanctification? I mean, if we have been declared righteous, and if there is now no condemnation in Christ, and if we are not saved by works; then what is sanctification for? Often times it feels like this to me: God does all the work of justification by faith. It is fully God's work. He saved me by grace, not by works of the law. But in Sanctification, it feels like just the opposite. Sanctification always seems to me to be a rejection of the reality of justification. It feels as if I am trying to save myself. I don't know how to reconcile it all. It's just such a struggle? Every week people come into my office, people who have been saved by grace. They are justified. They are in Christ. Yet, they obviously still struggle with sin, just like I do. And they come to me for help. Often, what I have to tell them amounts one thing: '*Try harder.*' No matter how I dress it up in Christian language, that's the underlying message. '*Buck up.*' '*Strive more.*' '*Pull yourself up by your boot straps.*' What does that have to do

with the Gospel? The thing is, I know how to offer the Gospel to the lost. That's clear. But I have no idea how to properly offer the Gospel to the people in my church. How can I? I don't even know what it means to me?"

Bill had wrestled with this perplexity many times. In fact, this was a burning internal conflict that often came to bear negatively upon his early ministry, and a struggle that often ended in great despair and frustration. As a pastor, he knew how to preach the gospel of justification to the lost and he loved to do so. But Bill did not know how to preach the gospel of sanctification to his flock. Justification meant *grace*. Sanctification meant *law*. His paradigm might be described this way:

For the unregenerate, Christ offers salvation through the Gospel. But for the redeemed, Christ only gives his approval and blessing if we keep the Moral Law. For the unregenerate, Christ rescues those who cannot save themselves. But in regard to the redeemed, Christ only helps those who help themselves. For Bill, the Gospel was something only offered to those who were without Christ. The words used in expressing justification were: *gospel, the Holy Spirit, repentance, grace, faith, and trusting Christ*, but the words used to express sanctification were quite different, words like: *law keeping, perfection, duty, self-effort, self-discipline, and trying harder*. The Gospel was the paradigm for unbelievers. Self-effort seemed to be the paradigm for Christians.

No wonder Bill suffered from depression. In his mind, odd as it might sound, Christ's love for unbelievers was unconditional. Christ offered them grace. But Christ's love for the elect was conditionally based upon their performance. Christ would only love the elect if they were good enough to deserve it. Sadly, Bill did not see the Gospel as a continual reality in his life. Instead of a life of freedom, Bill began to resent his life

in Christ. To him, it was a life of bondage, where he was doomed to continually chase a carrot that forever dangled just out of his reach.

Bill's dilemma is not an isolated difficulty. In fact, many Christians struggle with this same problem. In this paper I will seek to address this issue. I will argue that the doctrine of Christian sanctification from a Reformed perspective should be understood as a work of God's grace that is accomplished through a continual work of the Gospel, that produces an ongoing hope-filled repentance and a growing dependence upon Christ.

Through this study I will seek to:

- a. Clearly define what is meant by the term "*Sanctification by Faith*" and show its theological foundation and connection to "*Justification by Faith*"
- b. Observe the means of Sanctification: Grace imparted by the Spirit through Faith and Repentance, that results in greater trust in, and obedience to, Christ
- c. Exhibit how the Reformed view of Sanctification stands in stark contrast to antinomianism on one hand and legalistic perfectionism on the other.

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

Sanctification by Faith: Sola-Fide

Reformers have long affirmed “justification by faith”. This was one of the five pillars of the reformation – namely that salvation should be understood from the Scripture alone (*Sola Scriptura*), by grace alone (*Sola Gratia*), through faith alone (*Sola Fide*), in Christ alone (*Solus Christus*), for the Glory of God alone (*Soli Deo Gloria*). *Sola Fide* - the Reformed emphasis that the Christian is saved by faith in Christ alone, not of works - was the centerpiece of these five 'solas.' The Scripture made this crystal clear to Martin Luther and the Reformers throughout their study of God's Word, but it was particularly affirmed in the book of Romans, Galatians, Colossians, Ephesians, and Hebrews. Their understanding of justification was shaped by passages like Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11, Hebrews 10:38, and Habakkuk 2:4, all of which say clearly, "*The righteous shall live by faith.*"

The Reformed Confessions all affirm this position. Of justification, the Westminster Shorter Catechism says, "*Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein He pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.*"¹ The Belgic Confession unpacks this further saying, "*God imputes righteousness to (us) without works...(and) without presuming to trust in anything in ourselves, or in any merit of ours, relying and resting upon the obedience of Christ crucified alone, which becomes ours when we believe in Him.*"² The Westminster Confession adds, "*Those whom God*

¹ Ed. Joel Beeke & Sinclair Ferguson *Reformed Confessions Harmonized* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2006) 99

² *Ibid.*, 98

*effectually calls, He also freely justifieth...they receiving and resting on Him and His righteousness by faith; which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God.*³

Not only is justification by faith affirmed, but sanctification is also affirmed as a work of grace that is wrought through faith. Like justification by grace through faith, sanctification by grace through faith is a doctrine taught in the Reformed Confessions, and it is also vigorously affirmed by many reformed thinkers and pastors. Justification *and* sanctification are both held within the Sola-fide paradigm.

In his book *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, Sinclair Ferguson argues that the believer's union with Christ is central and foundational to sanctification.⁴ In *Faith and Sanctification*, G.C. 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.*"⁵ Going further Berkouwer continues, "*To understand the Sola-fide of the Reformation as the only proper response to the biblical message of sovereign grace is to know that this Sola-fide can never be a threat to real sanctification. Such a threat can emerge only from a denial or devaluation of this doctrine, based as it is on the view that Sola-fide is subversive of sanctification, must be called Rome's most fundamental error. It was no other than Sola-fide which made clear the true significance of sanctification, and distinguished it from all moralistic effort at self-improvement, in*

³ Beeke & Ferguson, 99

⁴ Sinclair B. Ferguson *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1988) 51

⁵ G.C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification*, trans. John Vriend, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1952) 191

*short, from all practices and beliefs which do violence to Sola-fide and, therefore, to Sola-gratia.*⁶

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.⁷

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.*”⁸ 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.*”⁹

It is most plain that those who are justified by faith will also exhibit a heart that desires to obey Christ, and to live a life of faith that exhibits the fruit of sanctification, no matter how weak or 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 fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith.*”¹⁰ So, obedience to God is the proof of a

⁶ Berkouwer, 14

⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 537

⁸ Anthony A. Hoekema, *Five Views on Sanctification* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1987) 65

⁹ John Owen, *The Glory of Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), 459.

¹⁰ *Westminster Confession*, Chapter 16, Article 2

true faith. Justifying faith produces sanctifying faith. Again, the fruit may be puny and weak, but there will be fruit just the same. 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; good because it comes from God. As the night follows the day, the man who has been justified by Christ, shall also be sanctified by Him and in Him and through Him. Christ, who by grace originates faith in the hearts of men in justification, shall also perfect it by the grace that comes through faith.

Connection between Justification and Sanctification

As we have seen, sanctification is a work of grace through faith, just as justification. However, we must go further. It is important that we understand that the Reformers did not see sanctification as a work of God that is categorically separate from justification. On the contrary, they clearly taught that there exists a deep connection between the two. Sanctification is built upon justification so that the Christian continues in faith, depending upon the very same Christ and the very same grace. Again, sanctification is a work of God's grace that is built upon Justification. The two are intrinsically connected.

Saying it another way, sanctification is a work of grace that is built upon the “faith-union” that the believer enjoys with Christ through the completed work of justification. Sanctification 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 provides, that the believer, once effectually called and regenerated, imperfectly yet assuredly, grows through the continual supply of strength that comes from the Spirit of Christ. Sanctification matures the believer in dependency upon Christ, so that he is continually 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.

Paul clearly describes this connection between justification and sanctification 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.*" Colossians 2:6 says, "*As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord [by grace through faith], so walk in Him [by grace through faith].*"

In Philippians 3:1-16, Paul boldly announces that he "*puts no confidence in his flesh*" but rather states that his worth is found in Christ, "*not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—.*" He goes on "*Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own...Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained.* Here we see the clear connection - "*Let us hold true to what we have attained.*" Another way of saying this might be: "*Let us hold true to that very same Christ, that very same grace, and that very same faith in our sanctification as we have attained in our justification.*"

Paul gives this emphasis again in Galatians 3:1-3 when he asks, "*O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was*

publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" Of course we know that the specific issue surrounding Paul's words had to do with circumcision, however, his bigger point has to do with the Galatians' disconnection from the reality of their justification. They are not holding true to what they have attained.

The writer to the Hebrews also admonishes us to understand this connection when he says, *"let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith_(Heb. 12:1-2)." Commenting on this verse, Charles Hodge writes, "The Christian runs his race "looking unto Jesus;" the life he lives, he lives by faith in the Son of God; it is by the constant worship of Christ; by the constant exercise of love toward Him; by constant endeavours to do his will; and by constantly looking to Him for the supply of grace and for protection and aid, that he overcomes sin and finally attains the prize of the high-calling of God."*¹¹

Going further, this connection between justification and sanctification can also be clearly seen in the Reformed Confessions. Notice the similarity between the language used to describe justification and the language used to describe sanctification. The Westminster Shorter Catechism says, *"Sanctification is the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness."*¹² If you look back at the description of justification, you will see that both descriptions begin with the same exact

¹¹ Charles Hodge *Vol. 3: Systematic Theology* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.) 231

¹² Beeke & Ferguson, 105

language: "*Justification is an act of God's free grace...*," and "*Sanctification is the work of God's free grace...*" In regard to *means*, notice that the only difference between the two is that justification is a one-time act, while sanctification is an ongoing work. Other than this distinction, the means are the same. Both are works of God's free grace. In regard to means, there is nothing of "self-effort" or "works" in either description. The very same Christ and the very same grace that works to justify us, also works to sanctify us.

The Belgic Confession also affirms this connection, "*It is so far from being true, that this justifying faith makes men remiss in a pious and holy life, that on the contrary, without it they would never do anything out of love to God, but only out of self-love or fear of damnation.*"¹³ Finally, question 77 in the Larger Catechism says flatly that sanctification is "*inseparably joined*" with justification.

MEANS OF SANCTIFICATION

Justification and Sanctification: Different Works

Now, in saying these things, we must understand that the reformers do not suggest that justification and sanctification are the *same* work of Grace. As we have already noted, justification is a one-time act of God's grace that declares that our sin is forgiven and that we are completely righteous before God. Sanctification is a continuous work of God's grace that imparts the grace of Christ in our lives that leads to greater trust in Christ, a deeper love for Christ, and a more yielded obedience to Him. Again, the Larger Catechism helps us with the distinction in question 77, "*Although sanctification and*

¹³ Beeke & Ferguson, 104

*justification be inseparably joined, yet they differ, in that God in justification imputeth the righteousness of Christ, in sanctification His Spirit infuseth grace, and enableth the exercise thereof; in justification, sin is pardoned; in sanctification, sin is subdued; justification doth equally free all believers from the revenging wrath of God, and that perfectly in this life, that they never fall again into condemnation; sanctification is not equal in all, nor in this life is it perfect in any, but it grows up to perfection."*¹⁴

There are many more differences that we will not note here, but it is vastly important to note one other significant difference:

- Justification deals with God's *Righteous* Wrath toward man
- Sanctification deals with Man's *Unrighteous* Anger toward God

Justification deals with God's *Righteous* Wrath toward man

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. Through the act of justification, the wrath of God 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, covenantal, eternal favor and blessing 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 forever in the work of Justification.

It is at this point that so many of the elect lose their way. They do not understand that God's wrath is completely eliminated and that God's favor is completely bestowed.

¹⁴ Beeke & Ferguson, 105

As a result, they confuse God's discipline with God's wrath. They cannot discern between God's continual anger at sin, without feeling that He is also angry with them. They continually feel that they must perform better in order to increase their standing before God. They see obedience as a performance to gain God's favor instead of seeing obedience as the natural fruit of regeneration.

But if this true, if justification forever eliminates God's wrath and eternally bestows God's favor, if sanctification is not a work that in any way addresses God's wrath or gains his favor, 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 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.

Sanctification deals with Man's *Unrighteous Anger* toward God

So then, 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, even though he is regenerate, the saint does not necessarily always enjoy or embrace this arrangement. Question 78 of the Larger Catechism points this out clearly, "*The imperfection of sanctification in believers ariseth from the remnants of sin abiding in every part of them...of the flesh warring against the Spirit.*"¹⁵

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 over 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 angrily wants to drag God into court, but then repents in sackcloth and ashes. It is the story of Jonah angrily running to Joppa but then repenting in the belly of a fish. It is the story of Jacob wrestling against God, but then repenting with a broken hip and a new name. It is the story of David lying and deceiving and manipulating, but then repenting and 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

¹⁵ Beeke & Ferguson, 105

resisting the will of Christ, denying Christ and running from Christ, who then repents and becomes a fisher of men.

Again, we must understand that this angry struggle with God is not the exceptional experience of the elect, nor should it be re-categorized as the experience of a "carnal" Christian. No. This is the common experience of all those who know Christ. Indeed, even the name that God has given us - *Israel* - establishes and identifies us along these lines, for that old Hebrew name means, "*Man striving against God.*" This is not true of the unregenerate. They do not struggle against sin. They are dead, lifeless, and are under the wrath of God. They do not fight against God. But the elect do fight, and get angry, and cry out.

In Romans 7, Paul relates this struggle to us clearly. Paul was a mature believer, yet he still struggled with anger, doubt, and fleshly striving. There are many who would dismiss Paul's struggle as a description of his life before Christ. But, Charles Hodge strongly disagrees with this view. "*There is nothing in the experience (of Paul in Romans 7 that is) inconsistent with the experience of the true children of God, evident from the fact that the same humility, the same sense of guilt, the same consciousness of indwelling sin, the same conviction of helplessness, here expressed, are found in all the penitential portions of Scripture. Job, David, Isaiah, and Nehemiah, make the same confessions and lamentations that the Apostle here makes. The same is true of believers since the coming of Christ. There is not one of them, not even the holiest, who is not constrained to speak of himself as Paul here speaks.*"¹⁶

¹⁶ Hodge, 223

It is clear then that sanctification does not address God's wrath toward man, but instead addresses man's unrighteous anger toward God. However, the gospel, just as in justification, is also at work in sanctification. For the Christian, the beautiful music of the Gospel can be found in the wonderful words of Paul in Romans 7:24-25, "*What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!*" This is the good news, the gospel, the euangelion - and it is a sweet song of salvation sung by Christ to the ears of the elect. Just as the grace of Christ saves the unregenerate from God's Holy Wrath, it also saves the elect from their endless anger, idolatry, selfishness and pride.

Justification and Sanctification: The Same Means - Faith, and Repentance

In these previous accounts we have clearly observed how the faith of each saint was strengthened through grace that resulted in faith and repentance. It must be understood that though the work of justification is *categorically* different than sanctification, the *means* are strikingly similar. As we have seen in the confessions, as justification is a work of God's grace, so too is sanctification. Charles Hodge make this point when he says, "*It is as true of the Christian that he is not sanctified by moral suasion, by the objective presentation of truth, as it is of the unrenewed sinner, that he is not regenerated by any such outward influences...salvation, therefore, from beginning to end is of grace; not only as being gratuitous to the exclusion of all merit on the part of the saved, but also as being carried on by the continued operation of grace, or the*

*supernatural power of the Spirit. Christ is our all. He is of God made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, sanctification, and redemption."*¹⁷

Furthermore, just as faith and repentance are produced in the newly regenerate heart in justification, so too are these twin graces produced in the heart of the elect through sanctification. In sanctification, the believer comes again and again to this renewal of faith and 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 faith and repentance are not simply 'external' passive assent or acquiescence but, as Jonathan Edwards might say, it is an internal work that results in "*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 internal affection for Christ) they have no saving grace.*"¹⁸ 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."

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, as I have already said, repentance is the twin sibling of faith. Turning to Christ in faith always involves a turning away from sin through repentance. They go hand in hand. Repentance and Faith are the internal instruments of the "heart affections" that Christ produces by His grace to transform the believer into His glorious like-ness.

¹⁷ Hodge, 220

¹⁸ Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (NuVision, 2007), 57.

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 and 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 3:19-20, 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.¹⁹ Finally, Martin Luther, in the very first of his 95 theses wrote, *“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.”*²⁰

¹⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 601.

²⁰ Martin Luther, *Martin Luther's 95 Theses*, trans. S. Nichols (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing)

Hodge emphasizes the daily need for faith and repentance in the life of the elect when he writes, "*The Christian) finds not only that he is often, even daily, overcome so as to sin in thought, word, and deed, but also that his faith, love, zeal, and devotion are never such as to satisfy his own conscience; much less can they satisfy God. He therefore is called upon to daily confess his sin, repent, and pray for forgiveness.*"²¹

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 UPHOLDS THE MORAL LAW

Antinomian Licentiousness:

Denying the Relevance of the Moral Law, Promoting Moral relativism

As stated earlier, it is of great importance that believers maintain a proper perspective in regard to sanctification. If not, they are susceptible to either antinomianism in one direction or legalism in the other direction. Generally speaking, believers often err in one of these two extremes. The first extreme, antinomianism (which means "*anti-law*") – claims that Christians are exempt from any obligation to obey the moral law. These would claim that there is no necessary connection at all

²¹ Hodge, 224

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. This view of justification produces an insidious licentiousness that often leads to all kinds of ugly disobedience and fleshly living. Ongoing grace, repentance, faith, and obedience become immaterial and sanctification becomes an unnecessary doctrine.

Of course, this is an extreme view of antinomianism. There are those 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 use of the law, which is commonly known as the Moral Law.

This rejection of the third use of the law, however, creates a ‘functional’ antinomianism. 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 antinomian becomes aimless and driven by any wind of doctrine. Therefore, in order to guard against this temptation toward

antinomianism, 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.

Hodge vehemently repudiates antinomianism. He says, "*Antinomianism has never had any hold in the churches of the Reformation. There is no logical connection between the neglect of moral duties, and the system which teaches that Christ is a Saviour as well from the power as from the penalty of sin; that faith is the act by which the soul receives and rests on Him for sanctification as well as for justification; and that such is the nature of the union with Christ by faith and indwelling of the Spirit, that no one is, or can be partaker of the benefit of his death, who is not also partaker of the power of his life...It is not (Christianity) which regards sin as so great an evil that it requires the blood of the Son of God for its expiation, and the law as so immutable that it requires the perfect righteousness of Christ for the sinner's justification, which leads to loose views of moral obligation.*"²²

Neonomian Perfectionism:

Diminishing the Magnitude of Moral Law and Promoting Fleshly Striving

Of course, there is a definite danger in the other extreme. As we have observed, antinomianism denies the proper uses of the law so that obedience becomes arbitrary and nebulous. However, the legalistic perfectionist moves in a different direction. Like the unbelieving Pharisees of old, he 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

²² Hodge, 241

law of God at all, but rather extolling a perverted modification of the law that emphasizes an adherence to "religious" practice. While the antinomian extols ortho-pathos (Right Feeling) and dismisses ortho-praxis (Right Doing), the legalistic perfectionist extols ortho-praxis (Right Doing) and dismisses ortho-pathos (Right Feeling). In answer to both extremes, gospel ortho-doxy (Right Thinking about the gospel) brings us into proper balance.

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 law. Instead of urging and giving shape to obedience by faith, the legalist becomes a near-sighted forest ranger who is counting 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 (which means "*new-law*"). He is not "anti-law". But he is not "pro-law" either. He is in fact a proponent of "new-law" or more accurately, "false-law". While the antinomian turns away from faith and repentance and moves toward mere "*intellectual assent*" or "*warm feelings*", the legalist turns away from faith and repentance and moves toward "*fleshly striving*" and "*self-effort*".

He writes neo-laws, 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 under his own scrutiny, and may even look 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 – extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector...I fast twice a week and I give tithes of all that I get (Luke 18:11-12).*”

He takes away from the law and adds new, pseudo-law, and then exalts himself before God as a faithful law keeper that God is obligated to bless.

Christian musician, Derek Webb, sarcastically describes the life of the neonomian 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...²³*

So we see that sanctification, for the neonomian, 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 and internal strife are marginalized. Put downs are accepted. As long

²³ Derek Webb, “*A New Law*,” *Mockingbird*, 2005 (Integrity Media), Compact disc.

as the neonomian keeps his 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 upon those who have caused the flaw. When he fails, he blames himself; he blames others; he blames God. 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 neonomian simply applies himself to trying harder. He makes up new rules to prop up the old ones, constantly amending the new-law constitution to make it more manageable.

Of this fleshly perfectionism, Charles Hodge has this to say, "*What the Scriptures teach concerning faith, repentance, and justification, is intended for all Christians; and so what is taught of sanctification suits the case of all believers. Indeed, if a man thinks himself perfect, and apprehends that he has already attained what his fellow believers are only striving for, a great part of the Bible must for him lose its value. What use can he make of the Psalms, the vehicle through which the people of God for millenniums have poured out their hearts? How can such a man sympathize with Ezra, Nehemiah, or any of the prophets? How strange to him must be the language of Isaiah, 'Woe is me I for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts'...no sound-minded man can regard himself as perfect, unless he lowers the standard of judgment to suit his case. And here lies one of the special dangers of the whole system. If the law of God can*

*be relaxed in its demands to suit the state of its subjects, then there is no limit to be assigned to its condescension."*²⁴

Thus perfectionism, just like antinomianism, inevitably lapses into a rejection of God's moral law. The two positions wind up in the same place. Antinomianism stands outside the Reformed view of sanctification because it rejects God's moral law and subjugates faith and repentance in favor of moral relativism. Neonomianism (or legalistic perfectionism) stands outside the Reformed view of sanctification because it diminishes God's moral law and subjugates faith and repentance in favor of moralistic striving. Though the road is different, the two paths lead to a spiritual dead end.

In contrast, those who embrace sanctification that comes by Grace through faith are truly able to be "pro-law". 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 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. The fruit of faith may be weak, and it may be puny, but true faith will nonetheless, produce true fruit.

²⁴ Hodge, 248, 258

CONCLUSION

In closing, we must consider that Sanctification by grace through faith is the only legitimate way to uphold God's law and to pursue a life of Christian obedience and love. This is the truth that my good friend Bill eventually came to realize and it has powerfully changed his life and his ministry. He now understands that "*the Gospel provides all that is needed for the salvation and complete sanctification of believers.*"²⁵ And so, Bill is able to powerfully preach the gospel to the unregenerate, to the elect, and to himself. To the glory of Christ, Bill has come to understand that justification and sanctification both extol the beauty of the Gospel and lead us to a life of blessed freedom in Christ.

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.

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- WCF, Chapter 13 (*my paraphrase*)

²⁵ Hodge, 245

²⁶ I have also included excerpts from the Heidelberg Catechism which can be found under "Works Cited" at the end of this document.

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Helpful Questions from the Heidleberg Catechism:

Q. 62. But why cannot our good works be the whole, or part of our righteousness before God?

A. Because, that the righteousness, which can be approved of before the tribunal of God, must be absolutely perfect, (a) and in all respects conformable to the divine law; and also, that our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin. (b)

(a) Gal.3:10; Deut.27:26. (b) Isa.64:6.

Q. 63. What! do not our good works merit, which yet God will reward in this and in a future life?

A. This reward is not of merit, but of grace. (a)

(a) Luke 17:10.

Q. 64. But does not this doctrine make men careless and profane?

A. By no means: for it is impossible that those, who are implanted into Christ by a true faith, should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness. (a)

(a) Matt.7:18; John 15:5.

Q. 86. Since then we are delivered from our misery, merely of grace, through Christ, without any merit of ours, why must we still do good works?

A. Because Christ, having redeemed and delivered us by his blood, also renews us by his Holy Spirit, after his own image; that so we may testify, by the whole of our conduct, our gratitude to God for his blessings, (a) and that he may be praised by us; (b) also, that every one may be assured in himself of his faith, (c) by the fruits thereof; and that, by our godly conversation others may be gained to Christ. (d)

(a) Rom.6:13; Rom.12:1,2; 1 Pet.2:5,9,10; 1 Cor.6:20. (b) Matt.5:16; 1 Pet.2:12; 1 Pet.1:6,7. (c) 2 Pet.1:10; Matt.7:17; Gal.5:6,22,23. (d) 1 Pet.3:1,2; Rom.14:19.

Q. 89. What is the mortification of the old man?

A. It is a sincere sorrow of heart, that we have provoked God by our sins; and more and more to hate and flee from them. (a)

(a) Rom.8:13; Joel 2:13; Hos.6:1.

Q. 90. What is the quickening of the new man?

A. It is a sincere joy of heart in God, through Christ, (a) and with love and delight to live according to the will of God in all good works. (b)

(a) Rom.5:1; Rom.14:17; Isa.57:15. (b) Rom.6:10,11; Gal.2:20.

Q. 91. But what are good works?

A. Only those which proceed from a true faith, (a) are performed according to the law of God, (b) and to his glory; (c) and not such as are founded on our imaginations, or the institutions of men. (d)

(a) Rom.14:23. (b) Lev.18:4; 1 Sam.15:22; Eph.2:10. (c) 1 Cor.10:31. (d) Deut.12:32; Ezek.20:18,19; Isa.29:13; Matt.15:7-9.

Q. 114. But can those who are converted to God perfectly keep these commandments?

A. No: but even the holiest men, while in this life, have only a small beginning of this obedience; (a) yet so, that with a sincere resolution they begin to live, not only according to some, but all the commandments of God. (b)

(a) 1 John 1:8-10; Rom.7:14,15; Eccl.7:20; 1 Cor.13:9. (b) Rom.7:22; Ps.1:2; James 2:10.

Q. 115. Why will God then have the ten commandments so strictly preached, since no man in this life can keep them?

A. First, that all our lifetime we may learn more and more to know (a) our sinful nature, and thus become the more earnest in seeking the remission of sin, and righteousness in Christ; (b) likewise, that we constantly endeavour and pray to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, that we may become more and more conformable to the image of God, till we arrive at the perfection proposed to us, in a life to come. (c)

(a) Rom.3:20; 1 John 1:9; Ps.32:5. (b) Matt.5:6; Rom.7:24,25. (c) 1 Cor.9:24; Philip.3:11-14.