

## The Larger Catechism

### Question 75

#### 75. Q. What is sanctification?

**A.** Sanctification is a work of God's grace, whereby they whom God hath, before the foundation of the world, chosen to be holy, are in time, through the powerful operation of his Spirit[314] applying the death and resurrection of Christ unto them,[315] renewed in their whole man after the image of God;[316] having the seeds of repentance unto life, and all other saving graces, put into their hearts,[317] and those graces so stirred up, increased, and strengthened,[318] as that they more and more die unto sin, and rise unto newness of life.[319]

#### Scriptural Defense and Commentary

[314] **Ephesians 1:4.** According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love. **1 Corinthians 6:11.** And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God. **2 Thessalonians 2:13.** But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth. [315] **Romans 6:4-6.** Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection: Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. [316] **Ephesians 4:23-24.** And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness. [317] **Acts 11:18.** When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life. **1 John 3:9.** Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. [318] **Jude 20.** But ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost. **Hebrews 6:11-12.** And we desire that every one of you do show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end: That ye be not slothful, but followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises. **Ephesians 3:16-19.** That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God. **Colossians 1:10-11.** That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God; Strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness. [319] **Romans 6:4, 6, 14.** Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.... Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin..... For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace. **Galatians 5:24.** And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts.

#### Introduction

Sanctification has fallen on hard times. Cheap grace has made the mere profession of faith the only thing that matters. It does not matter if the person exhibits fruit or not. His profession is sufficient. Yet sanctification is the great emphasis in the Bible. Paul says, "It is God's will that you should be sanctified" (1Thess. 4:3, NIV11). Christ died for His people "that she might be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:27). We were chosen "that we should be holy and blameless before him" (Eph. 1:4). God who called us is Holy, so we should be holy in our conduct (1Peter 1:15). So sanctification or growth in holiness is not a small matter.

The Larger Catechism addresses this doctrine in #75-79. Different facets of this doctrine with its related questions are carefully developed. Sanctification is not a side issue; it is one of the many benefits that flow from our union with Christ. It is neither optional nor unnecessary. In fact, many of our doubts and woes come from our struggle with sanctification.

The Catechism explains sanctification only after its teaching on justification and adoption. Those two must come first (if we are speaking of order). Those crucial doctrines serve as the foundation for our study of sanctification; they are distinct but not inseparable.

Reformed divines differ from the Lutherans on this doctrine. Whereas we would be on the same page with them in the matter of justification by faith alone, we differ from them as to the definition and the role of sanctification. The Lutheran theologian, Gerhard O. Forde, defined sanctification as “simply the art of getting used to justification.”<sup>1</sup> In fact, he believes talking about sanctification can be dangerous because it can easily lead to the “salvationing” we are to do.<sup>2</sup> That is, it can easily turn into saving our selves by our own holiness.

Forde’s warning against its danger merits some attention. Indeed, sanctification does not justify us. It does not earn us salvation. Forde says, “Talk about sanctification can be dangerous in that it misleads and seduces the old being into thinking it is still in control. We may grudgingly admit we cannot justify ourselves, but then we attempt to make up for that by getting serious about sanctification.” For that reason, he argues sanctification cannot be separated from justification.<sup>3</sup> That explains why he defines justification as “the art of getting used to justification.”

But this does great injustice to Scripture and greatly misunderstands the imperatives in Scripture as being Law or legalistic.<sup>4</sup> When Paul said that God’s will for us is our sanctification in 1Thess. 4:3, he also concretely explains it as “that you abstain from sexual immorality.” He does *not* say, “This is the will of God, your sanctification, that is, that you get used to justification.” Sanctification is concrete (in the least); it is not exclusively a mental exercise (or however we might describe the “art of getting used to justification”).

Forde’s Lutheran understanding can be found in some within Presbyterianism. Tullian Tchividjian (pronounced cha-vi-jin) says that “sanctification is the daily hard work of going back to the reality of our justification.”<sup>5</sup> “Sanctification is the hard work of giving up our efforts at self-justification.”<sup>6</sup> These are not the best ways of stating the doctrine of sanctification. His is a reductionistic understanding of obedience = having to obey = rule keeping = legalism = self-justification. Interestingly, he cites Gerhard Forde’s essay we’ve cited above to support his understanding of sanctification.<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that some of what Tchividjian is concerned about isn’t helpful; they are very helpful. Yet we should be guarded about defining sanctification in those terms.

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<sup>1</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, “The Lutheran View,” in *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, ed. Donald L. Alexander, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1989), 13, 27.

<sup>2</sup> Forde, “The Lutheran View,” 15.

<sup>3</sup> Forde, “The Lutheran View,” 16.

<sup>4</sup> Without developing this too much, it seems that Forde understands “new being” (new creature in Christ) in forensic terms, as looking at life as a justified person (and the old being looks at life as under the law). This seems to go hand in hand with his definition of sanctification. New life in Christ is not forensic — it is not forensic in the sense that nothing personal is changed in us.

<sup>5</sup> Tullian Tchividjian, *Jesus + Nothing = Everything* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2011), 95

<sup>6</sup> Tchividjian, *Jesus + Nothing = Everything*, 172.

<sup>7</sup> Tchividjian, *Jesus + Nothing = Everything*, 174.

Puritans, like William Ames, defined theology as “the doctrine or teaching of living to God.”<sup>8</sup> Even theology is viewed more practically for them. Sanctification is a real change in the person; Sanctification, Ames says, is a real change “wherein justification is manifested and its consequences, so to speak, brought into being.”<sup>9</sup> Sanctification comes out of justification; it doesn’t sit on justification.

### Sanctification is a Work of God’s Grace

“**Sanctification is a work of God’s grace, whereby they whom God hath, before the foundation of the world, chosen to be holy, are in time, through the powerful operation of his Spirit...**” The first key difference is between the words “work” and “act.” Justification is an “act of God’s free grace” (#70) and Adoption is an “act of the free grace of God” (#74). Sanctification is a **work of God’s grace**. Sanctification is a process and not a one time act. “Justification and adoption are instantaneous acts, completed once for all in an instant of time, but sanctification is a lifelong process starting the moment the person is regenerated, and continuing until the moment of death when the soul enters the state of glory.”<sup>10</sup> The believer cannot be more justified but he can sanctified more and more.

Whose work is it? The divines assiduously avoided legalism in their understanding of sanctification. It is a **work of God’s grace**. This is something God graciously does in a believer. In particular, it is **through the powerful operation of his Spirit**. Paul speaks of the “sanctification of/by the Spirit” (2Th. 2:13 But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, *through sanctification by the Spirit* [ἐν ἁγιασμῷ πνεύματος] and belief in the truth.).

In 1 Thessalonians Paul exhorted the believers again and again to dedicate themselves to sanctification (1 Thess. 4.3, 4, 7),<sup>93</sup> reminding them that sanctification was God’s will for them and that God called them to the same. But he also assured the Thessalonians that sanctification was a work of God (1 Thess. 5.23) that he effects through the agency of the Holy Spirit (1 Thess. 4.8). The process of sanctification began at their conversion (1 Pet. 1.2) and is being worked out throughout their lives so that the believers might be blameless before the Lord at his coming (1 Thess. 5.23; and see Rom. 15.16; 1 Cor. 6.11; 1 Pet. 1.2). Far from its being auxiliary to their salvation, the apostle understands the *sanctifying work* as the action of the Spirit of God that brings about salvation.<sup>11</sup>

Paul makes it clear that sanctification is not something appended to salvation but is wrought in our salvation. As God saves us, the Spirit sanctifies us. No genuine believer is a “carnal Christian” because he is immediately sanctified by the Spirit. In 1Thess. 2:13, Paul connects our election, salvation, and sanctification (“God chose... to be saved... through the sanctification by the Spirit”). Calvin puts it like this, “in order that we may know that we are elected by God, there is no occasion to inquire as to what he decreed before the creation of the world, but we find in ourselves a satisfactory proof if he has sanctified us by his Spirit...”

<sup>8</sup> William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, trans. John E. Eusden (Durham, NC: The Labyrinth Press, 1983), 77.

<sup>9</sup> Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, 167.

<sup>10</sup> Johannes G. Vos, *The Westminster Larger Catechism: A Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 167.

<sup>11</sup> Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (PNTC; Accordance electronic ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 326-327.

Only the elect are sanctified. Notice who it is the Spirit sanctifies: **they whom God hath, before the foundation of the world, chosen to be holy, are in time...** Eph. 1:4 says, “he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him...” (also see 2Thess 2:13 cited above). God’s elect were chosen so that they would be holy. The phrase “are in time” teaches that elect, on this side of heaven, are sanctified. This spiritual renewal occurs not in theory but in history. The elect of God are going to be holy in this world. Calvin (commenting on 2Thess. 2:13) says, “And by this means is refuted the wickedness of those who make the election of God a pretext for every kind of iniquity, while Paul connects it with faith and regeneration<sup>12</sup> in such a manner, that he would not have it judged of by us on any other grounds.”

Before explaining the next thought in the LC, a few words should be said about the word “sanctification.” Vos notes two meanings (“sanctification of position or external privileges” as in 1Cor. 7:14 and “personal sanctification” as in 1Cor. 6:11) of sanctification. Ames lists several ways in which sanctification can be used. “Sanctification by institution” is something God sets apart like the “sanctification of the seventh day”. “Sanctification by association with symbols” has to do with setting apart for holy use like the elements of the Lord’s Supper. “Sanctification by manifestation, as God is said to be sanctified by men, 1 Peter 3:15.”<sup>13</sup> The divines had in mind what Vos calls “personal sanctification” and what Ames calls “a real change of qualities and disposition” of believers.

### United to Christ’s Death and Resurrection

The Holy Spirit does not work independently of Christ. He applies what Christ did for us on the cross. Sanctification is the Spirit’s **“applying the death and resurrection of Christ unto them”**. That is, what Christ did on the cross and what He achieved in His resurrection are applied to believers. Johannes G. Vos explained it this way:

This means that those benefits which Christ purchased for the elect by his sufferings and death, and which are guaranteed by his resurrection, are actually bestowed on the Christian by the Holy Spirit. God the Father planned our redemption; God the Son purchased our redemption; God the Holy Spirit applies our redemption so that we actually experience the benefit of it. (Vos, 168)

That is true but the divines are not simply addressing the salvation accomplished by Christ and applied the Spirit. It is more specific; it is about sanctification. The verses used to support the clause (“applying the death and resurrection of Christ unto them”) speak of what has come to be called “definitive sanctification.”

Before exegeting the passage, let us notice the problem that must be surmounted before we can see the beauty and wonder of the solution offered in the phrase “applying the death and resurrection of Christ unto them.” Before our conversion, we lived in sin. We were under its power and dominion. Now we are talking about sanctification, growth in holiness. How can we

<sup>12</sup> For Calvin, regeneration and sanctification or renewal are often synonymous.

<sup>13</sup> Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, 168-69.