

Positional Sanctification and Progressive Sanctification

Now for the second consequence of a proper view of positional sanctification: progressive sanctification. Note the order in which I tackle these two consequences. I tackle them in this order because it is the order of the new covenant, as the Scriptures make clear. Startling as it may sound to many, the New Testament puts assurance before progressive sanctification – after positional sanctification but before progressive sanctification. Take Romans 8:1-17 (especially verses 14-17) and Ephesians 1:1-14 (especially verses 13-14) for a start.¹ Moreover, the New Testament appeals to the believer's positional sanctification and his assurance to promote his progressive sanctification – not the other way round. The new covenant, the law of Christ, takes the believer to his positional sanctification, urging him to live it out in daily life; in other words, the believer's assurance of his standing in Christ becomes a vital part of his progressive sanctification. This, in itself, is highly instructive. The Reformed reverse this, making the believer's assurance depend on his progressive sanctification, and both to depend on the law, not grace in Christ! I cannot help reminding all such teachers – and those who are in bondage under them – of the great truth: 'Christ is all' (Col. 3:11).

Many Christians, alas, go badly astray over the question of progressive sanctification. One reason lies in the fact that many believers make far too little use – new-covenant use – of their positional sanctification in Christ.² *And this is*

¹ See my *Assurance*.

² As I noted in the previous chapter, positional sanctification is intimately linked with regeneration and justification, of course. This applies throughout this chapter. And when looking at

precisely the point at which the Reformed go astray. It is their legal teaching on progressive sanctification which brings so much misery to many believers, confining them to a treadmill of rule, regulation and fear. When the Reformed talk of progressive sanctification, instead of taking the believer to his positional and ultimate perfection in Christ, they direct him to the law. I ask you! How wrong can one be? As the New Testament makes abundantly plain, in the new covenant the believer's progressive sanctification comes through looking back to his positional sanctification and looking forward to his absolute sanctification, not by looking at the law and concentrating on the feebleness of his progress.³ Grievously, the Reformed, with their legal teaching on such a vital matter, bring many believers into years of bondage and sadness.

It all started with the medieval Roman Church. But it is John Calvin who has to carry the can for the dominant position of the law today.⁴ Calvin took the medieval doctrine on the law and set it in concrete. He, and his followers with their covenant theology, have produced this present state of affairs. Calvin claimed that the law of Moses is the best means for a believer to discover God's will, and, by meditating on it, be moved to godliness. In other words, progressive sanctification is by the law. According to Calvin, the law, a perpetual, inflexible and

Romans, although I speak of positional sanctification the apostle is referring to justification. I admit this, but since the two are so closely linked, I feel that this is acceptable.

³ In addition to what I say here, see my other works such as *Christ; Grace*.

⁴ Dominant? Yes indeed. Take just one example: the Westminster Confession. This and its associated statements (along with the 1689 Particular Baptist Confession, a document heavily dependent on the Westminster) hold sway over huge swathes of believers, including many who, though not overtly bound by such documents, are, nevertheless, incidentally governed by them. In light of this, how grievous it is that out of 196 questions, the Larger Westminster Catechism has more than 60 on the law, a staggering ratio for the age of the new covenant.

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perfect rule of life, is a whip rousing a lazy ass, driving the believer to godliness. The law is at once the *motive, means* and *standard* of progressive sanctification, teaching the believer what God requires of him, and, acting as a whip, thrashing him into obedience, beating down his laziness. I am not making it up! Listen to Calvin:

The servant of God will derive this further advantage from the law: by frequently meditating upon it, he will be excited to obedience, and confirmed in it, and so drawn away from the slippery paths of sin. In this way must the saints press onward, since, however great the alacrity with which, under the Spirit, they hasten toward righteousness, they are retarded by the sluggishness of the flesh, and make less progress than they ought. The law acts like a whip to the flesh, urging it on as men do a lazy, sluggish ass. Even in the case of a spiritual man, inasmuch as he is still burdened with the weight of the flesh, the law is a constant stimulus, pricking him forward when he would indulge in sloth.⁵

The office of the law is to excite [believers] to the study of purity and holiness, by reminding them of their duty.⁶

Thus, according to Calvin, the law is both behind the believer – whipping him, compelling him, pricking him – and ahead of him, forever setting an unattainable standard, demanding absolute obedience.⁷ Countless teachers these past centuries, accepting Calvin’s view, have promulgated it with vigour. They still do.

All this is utterly misguided, unbiblical, contrary to the new covenant. The New Testament refutes it. Romans 6 and 7 are classic in this regard. To appreciate the force of the apostle’s argument, please read Romans 6:1 – 7:6 aloud, and do so in several versions. As you do, take full note of the powerful way Paul argues for the believer’s progressive sanctification on the basis of his union with

⁵ Calvin: *Institutes* 2.7.12.

⁶ Calvin: *Institutes* 3.19.2.

⁷ See my *Christ* pp64,68-69,155,213-214.

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Christ; that is, his positional sanctification. I quote the most relevant extracts from the extended Romans passage, emphasising the point at issue; namely, that the believer must *consciously use*, definitely apply, the truth about his positional sanctification by virtue of his union with Christ:

Now if [since] we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. *So you also must consider yourselves* dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Let not sin *therefore* reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!... You also have died to the law through the body of Christ, *so that you may belong to another*, to him who has been raised from the dead, *in order that we may bear fruit for God*. For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code (Rom. 6:9-15; 7:4-6).

As I showed in my *Fivefold Sanctification*,⁸ in the new covenant, Christ, by his Spirit unites believers to himself, pardons all their sins, justifies them – that is, accounts and makes them righteous before God⁹ – and gives them a new heart in their regeneration, and this leads them to an essential and inevitable progressive sanctification.¹⁰ As I

⁸ See my *Fivefold* pp35-39.

⁹ See my *Four 'Antinomians'*.

¹⁰ By 'essential and inevitable', I mean that the believer is responsible and accountable to God for his obedience to

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further stated, this vital point concerning the believer's progressive sanctification is, alas, on occasion, denied. I quote:

It has been said that 'sanctification', as used by Paul, never means advance in the Christian life, but always refers to a definitive act of grace. Nevertheless, this definitive sanctification – or, as I call it, positional sanctification – always leads to the lifelong process of progressive sanctification. This could also be called 'transforming sanctification' (2 Cor. 3:18), from the verb *metamorphoō*. See Romans 8:29, 'transfigured' (Matt. 17:2; Mark 9:2) or 'to change into another form' (Rom. 12:2). We cannot be positionally sanctified without inevitably being progressively sanctified. The provision of the new covenant ensures this: the new heart, mind, will, disposition – that is, regeneration – brings this (Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 36:26-27; Rom. 6:1 – 8:4; 1 Cor. 1:2; 6:11; 1 Thess. 4:3-8; Heb. 8:6-13; 10:14-18). At conversion we are regenerated (transforming) and justified (positional). We are also sanctified (combines both, positional and transforming). Note the perfect passive in 1 Corinthians 1:2, speaking of a past event with permanent effect leading to holiness in character. Believers are sanctified and they are called to be sanctified (1 Cor. 6:11), the aorist passive speaking of a transitional and transformative event, once for all, but shown in life.

I then quoted Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Ezekiel 36:25-27, concluding the point thus:

In short, in the new covenant God takes dead sinners and makes them live (regeneration), guilty sinners and acquits and accounts them righteous (justification), sinners far off from him, ruined in utter darkness, and separates them to himself (positional sanctification). The result is that dead, ruined, condemned, lost sinners are made perfect in God's sight. And, by the power of the Spirit, they live to the glory of God, obeying his commands in the law of

Scripture, and that the believer will be moved to obedience by the inward work of the Spirit.

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Christ, which law is written both in their hearts and in Scripture, all by the Spirit (Jer. 31:33; 2 Tim. 3:16).

This doctrine is written large right across the New Testament. The new covenant never – never – makes the law of Moses (or, as the Reformed like to confine it, the ten commandments, the so-called ‘moral law’) the motive, the standard, the driving force behind the believer’s progressive sanctification. Never! It always makes Christ, the gospel, grace, the Holy Spirit, the spring and life of the believer’s godliness and consecration to the Lord. Covenant theology demands law; new-covenant theology speaks of grace in Christ. Which did Paul highlight? Out of the scores of examples I could choose to make good my assertion that Paul always stressed grace, let me take just one; namely, Paul’s letter to Titus. I start with this:

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for himself his own special people, zealous for good works (Titus 2:11-14).

Clearly, the apostle is speaking of believers. Especially is he concerned with the way believers should be instructed to live a life worthy of their calling in Christ; in other words, how to be progressively sanctified – the very issue we are thinking about. More, Paul is particularly interested in the motive, the spring, the energising power behind that godliness of life. Bearing this in mind, now listen to what he says to Titus; note the apostle’s argument: It is ‘*the grace of God that brings salvation*’ – not the law, but grace – that teaches believers to ‘live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age’. Naturally, therefore, Paul commands and urges Titus to ‘speak *these things*’ (Tit. 2:15). Speak *these* things! What things? That believers should live godly lives? Yes, of course. But *that* is not Paul’s point! To preach that as it stands is to preach duty

and obedience by rule. Stress *these* things, thundered the apostle. What things? Grace, Christ's redemption, Christ's death, Christ's return, the believer's salvation, his positional sanctification.¹¹ This is the way to get the believer to produce godliness, he says. Preach Christ! Preach the gospel! Preach grace! Stress *these* things!

This is what the apostle wants Titus to do. He insists on it. Preach Christ! Keep preaching Christ! Not just that sinners will be converted, but that saints will be progressively sanctified. Remind believers that Christ accomplished their justification. Keep telling them of their position in Christ. Keep setting out their positional sanctification. Leave them in no doubt that their standing in Christ is inevitably connected to their progressive sanctification, and leads to it. Stress all this! Keep stressing this. *This*, not law! Stress that it is all in Christ and through Christ! This is what the apostle demands of Titus. Christ himself is the positional sanctification of believers, and this is the motive, means and measure of their progressive sanctification: 'Our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ... gave himself for us, that he might... purify for himself his own special people, zealous for good works'. It is not the law, the whip of the law!

Verse and chapter divisions in Scripture are artificial impositions on the text, which, more often than not, seriously damage, if not ruin, the flow of the argument.¹² Here is a case in point. Paul's line of reasoning, which he puts before Titus, carries over into the next chapter. Indeed, he is prepared to go over the same ground again, repeating himself in order to gain his point: 'This is a faithful saying, and these things I want you to affirm constantly, that those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and

¹¹ Sanctification? Yes, for that is what 'his own special people' means. Believers are separated unto God; hence, they are sanctified.

¹² This is why a paragraph Bible is so much more valuable than a verse Bible. I would say it is essential.

profitable to men' (Tit. 3:8). 'These things I want you to affirm constantly': 'I want you to stress these things': 'I desire you to strongly insist on these things'. Stress, strongly insist on, or affirm constantly *what* things? The necessity for good works? Yes, but not only that. In order to produce these good works in his hearers, Paul urges Titus to stress, to affirm constantly, 'the kindness and love of God our Saviour', to lay emphasis on their salvation as believers, and to insist that it is 'not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us' through the regenerating grace 'of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, that, having been justified by his grace, we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life' (Tit. 3:4-7). *These* are the things which Titus must stress in order to produce good works in the lives of his believing hearers. So Paul asserts.

It stands out a mile! God's grace in Christ, the believer's positional sanctification in Christ, is the motive, the spring, the driving force that moves the believer to progressive sanctification. It is not the law! And since Christ is the believer's positional sanctification (1 Cor. 1:30), this means that we must preach Christ. He – Christ – experientially sanctifies in every respect. 'The law is the believer's perfect rule', says covenant theology. 'Christ is all' (Col. 3:11), says Scripture.

So much for Paul's letter to Titus. But the New Testament is full of the same. Full of it! Christ's law makes gospel promises the motive for holiness (2 Cor. 7:1). Not the law! It is the nature of God (1 Pet. 1:15-16) and the believer's relation to him (Eph. 5:1; 1 Thess. 2:12; 1 Pet. 1:14,17), the gospel of Christ (Phil. 1:27), the mercies of God (Rom. 12:1; Eph. 4:32), the name, person and attributes of Christ and the believer's relation to him (1 Cor. 1:10; 2 Cor. 10:1; Eph. 5:2; Phil. 2:5; Col. 3:1), the believer's calling (Eph. 4:1; 1 Thess. 2:12; 1 Pet. 2:11), the redemption Christ accomplished (1 Pet. 1:17-21), the hope of Christ's return (Col. 3:4-5; 1 Thess. 5:8-11; 2 Pet. 3:10-

12; 1 John 3:1-3), and so on, which Christ in his law makes the motive for his people's obedience. Not the law of Moses! The bulwark against wicked men, lawless, unprincipled men, is for believers to 'grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' (2 Pet. 3:17-18). So runs the law of Christ, the new covenant. The promotion of godliness, and the defence against lawlessness, is not by the law of Moses. Which New Testament text commands believers to grow in the law of Moses? Where do we read any New Testament passage urging believers to meditate constantly on the law of Moses in order to be godly?¹³ Progressive sanctification is by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. What else should it be in the new covenant? What else could it be?¹⁴

Sadly, many (most?) believers today are under a very different regime. They are locked into, or under, a ministry which either explicitly, or implicitly, encourages and instructs them to look to the law and man-made regulations for their holiness. But instead of spiritual consecration to Christ, all that this produces is conformity to rules, a legal spirit, and a growing conviction of constant failure. How depressing! How contrary to the new covenant! How unlike the believers we read of in the New Testament, who were characterised by an exuberant sense of liberty and joy (2 Cor. 3:17-18; 1 Pet. 1:8-9, for example), only losing it when listening to law teachers (Gal. 4:15; 5:1,13)!

So much for these two consequences of a right understanding of positional and absolute sanctification: assurance and progressive sanctification. As I have explained, there are many more benefits which flow from the believer's positional sanctification, but since these two play such a vital role in locking so many believers in fear

¹³ Rom. 7:22 does not fit the bill. Paul does not command believers to meditate on the law. Besides which it has to be proved that 'the law' in question is the law of Sinai. See my *Psalms 119*.

¹⁴ *Christ* pp225-227.

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and doubt, I have felt it right to concentrate on them. Speaking from a pastoral point of view, they are the most pressing for many believers today. Judging by the New Testament, it was ever thus.

Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account (Heb. 13:12-17).

Notice the ‘therefore let us’: ‘Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us...’. And the context of these closing words to this majestic letter is all progressive sanctification, based on our positional sanctification in Christ.