

## *Introduction*

Sanctification. What an elastic word it is! As is its bed-fellow, ‘saint’. To be a ‘saint’ is to be sanctified. To some, a ‘saint’ is a person who, though having to suffer under the most appalling conditions, does so without grumbling: ‘She’s a real saint to put up with it!’ To many others, a ‘saint’ is one whom the Roman Catholic Church has recognised as (or pronounced to be) a person who, now dead, when living performed at least two miracles, and, as such, is one who is worthy of veneration, and to whom the faithful should pray. Then again, many talk about Saint Paul or Saint Peter.

The Bible knows nothing of any of this. Nothing! True, the New Testament does speak of ‘saints’ – over 60 times, in fact – but always in the plural.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it is the favourite scriptural word for believers. Clearly, therefore, we must have scriptural views of this important topic.

Sanctification. The New Testament teaches us that in eternity, God decreed to sanctify his elect in Christ. It also teaches us that Christ accomplished the sanctification of the elect in his death. It further teaches us that the moment the elect sinner trusts Christ he is perfectly sanctified. It further teaches us that the converted sinner (the believer) must live a sanctified life. Finally, it teaches us that at the return of Christ the believer will be absolutely sanctified. Moreover, according to the New Testament, the believer’s appreciation of all this plays a vital role in his assurance and his practical godliness, and thus leads to his absolute sanctification or glorification. It is this fivefold sanctification which I address in this small volume.

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<sup>1</sup> Phil. 4:21, sometimes translated ‘every saint’, is literally ‘all the saints’. The Old Testament has 35 occurrences of ‘saints’, with only two possible uses of ‘saint’ (Ps. 106:16; Dan. 8:13).

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In particular, I want to draw attention to one of the five;<sup>2</sup> namely, the believer's sanctification at the point of conversion, which is far too little thought about, and is only meagrely understood, appreciated and *consciously used* by most believers. Indeed, let me make a confession, and say why I am writing on this subject at this time. Until very recently, I had not appreciated the importance of this specific aspect of sanctification, and especially the part it plays in the believer's assurance and his ongoing godliness.

Furthermore, I have been personally encouraged to see how a full understanding of this aspect of the believer's sanctification strengthens the biblical argument in some of my previous works. As a consequence, I want to do what I can to help fellow-believers enjoy the riches of our inheritance in Christ. Especially do I say this in light of the recent welcome production of works on new-covenant theology, a phenomenon to which I hope to make further contribution in this little volume. For the believer's sanctification at conversion is one of the great glories of the new covenant, and is of immense practical importance for the believer in his ongoing spiritual experience. That is why I stressed 'consciously used' above.

In this volume, I set out, in brief, this fivefold sanctification. But, as always, it is the practical consequences which we have to come to terms with. I agree with the Puritan, William Perkins. 'What's the use of it?', he would ask. In this spirit, therefore, I intend to publish a second small volume in which I will address two of the many consequences of the believer's sanctification in Christ at the point of conversion. Only two, but, nevertheless, the two consequences I have in mind are of the utmost importance; namely, the believer's assurance and his holiness of life. But, as I say, that will form the substance of the follow-up volume to this.

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<sup>2</sup> All five aspects are essential of course. If, for instance, the believer's life of practical godliness, obedience to Scripture by the power of the Spirit, and the fact that it is never complete in this life, is not given sufficient emphasis, the twin dangers of antinomianism or perfectionism rear their ugly heads.

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Bible translators have had some difficulty over the words ‘sanctification’ and ‘holiness’. To put it simply, while ‘sanctification’ is probably best reserved for those places where the New Testament speaks of God’s activity in producing the status of sanctification within the believer, the effect of that sanctification in the ongoing life of the believer is probably best captured by the word ‘holiness’. If this scheme had been adopted by the translators, not only would the final version have been more faithful to the Greek, but it would have set out more clearly the doctrine of sanctification in the new covenant, and much of the present confusion over this topic would have been prevented. The fact is, believers are sanctified (they are perfect in Christ before God), they must be sanctified (they must be holy in life, they must live out their standing before God), they will be sanctified (they will, absolutely, at the return of Christ, be made absolutely perfect).<sup>3</sup>

Taking full account of this resolves the seeming contradiction between certain biblical statements. Just one example must suffice. The writer to the Hebrews declared: ‘By a single offering [Christ] has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified’ (Heb. 10:14), and yet Paul could say: ‘Not that I... am already perfect’ (Phil. 3:12). Yet again, the writer to the Hebrews said, and said just before the statement just quoted: ‘We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all’ (Heb. 10:10)! And all three are right! Indeed, the believer can say that when Christ comes he will be made perfect! The fact is, the believer can say: ‘I am perfect; I am not yet perfect, but I am being perfected; and one day I will be perfect’, which is the same as saying: ‘I am sanctified; I am being sanctified; and I will be sanctified’. How can this be? Once we grasp the doctrine of the believer’s fivefold sanctification, these statements become perfectly<sup>4</sup> consistent and comprehensible. More! Our hearts are

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<sup>3</sup> Having registered my complaint against the unfortunate translators (whom I admire immensely), even so it is true to say that we have to get used to words taking different meanings and nuances. The context is king.

<sup>4</sup> Pun intended.

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warmed and our spirits are stirred as we think about one of the glorious works of the triune God in the new covenant, and especially once we realise that all this is true of all who are in Christ. We shall be more strongly assured and more dedicated to live a life of holiness to the glory of God, shining more brightly as lights in this dark world which constitutes Satan's realm.

Let me close this Introduction with an apology. I know I am prone to repetition, though I am relieved to find something of the same tendency in the apostles. However, I know that in this work I have been particularly guilty of the fault, if fault it is. This is partly because of the nature of the subject itself, and partly because of the aforementioned problems caused by translation. Even so, the main responsibility is mine. The fact is, trying to be helpful, I like to make each section as complete as possible in itself. Where this annoys some readers, it might, I hope, help others. In addition, I like to quote Scripture fully since this avoids two snags: either having to take my references as read, or else interrupting the reading of the book by turning up the Bible. Despite my style, I hope many will find enough value in what I write to persevere. The subject, if not the book, is well worth it, I assure you.