

Positional Sanctification

The New Testament declares that every believer, at the point of faith, is united to Christ, is separated from the world, and is separated unto God. In other words, every believer is, without exception, perfectly sanctified, positionally speaking. Scripture defines believers as those who are sanctified, not merely(!) in the Father's decree, not merely(!) sanctified in the Son's finished work, but actually sanctified. In making this point, Scripture frequently (if not invariably?) uses a tense which defines believers as those who have been, by faith, at the point of faith, once and for ever sanctified. This sanctification has nothing to do with the believer's works or feelings. It is simply, merely(!), a fact about every believer; a glorious fact, but, nevertheless, simply a declaration about every believer. In itself, this sanctification involves no duty. Duty follows, as will become apparent, but the believer's positional sanctification is at once a complete, finished and entire work of God's grace within him. At the point of faith, in his conversion, every believer is sanctified, perfectly sanctified, set apart to God and for God, called out of the world, delivered from the domain of Satan, redeemed from sin, and liberated from bondage, fear, law, sin and death. He is a member of the particular, special, holy, separated people of God. And none of this can ever be reversed.

Strong stuff! Let me prove it. I begin with Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders:

I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified (Acts 20:32).

In talking of 'those who are sanctified', Paul was describing every believer. The apostle spoke in this elevated way about all believers, of course, because it was the very language the Lord Jesus had used when commissioning him to his life's work, just after his conversion. As Christ declared:

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I am Jesus... I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles – to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me (Acts 26:15-18).

As can be seen, this is how Jesus made clear to the newly-converted Saul, right at the start of his life's work as an apostle, the glorious truth that, by the power and sovereign intervention of God, sinners are to be sanctified, brought out of darkness, delivered from Satan's grip, and brought to God and into forgiveness. This, of course, was Paul's own experience at that very time: Saul of Tarsus, the arch-persecutor of Christ himself (noted in all three accounts, Acts 9:5; 22:8; 26:14) in his people. But he had been converted, and so had been sanctified! True, his conversion had been unique in that it was by the direct intervention of Christ himself. Nevertheless, as Christ made clear to his servant, every converted sinner experiences this glorious change under the preaching of the gospel.¹ This, of course, is why Paul was dogmatic that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe (1 Cor. 1:18), and why he would do nothing but preach the gospel – preach the gospel, and nothing else (1 Cor. 1:17 – 2:16; 9:16), especially concentrating on Christ, his crucifixion and lordship (1 Cor. 2:2; 2 Cor. 4:5). No wonder he so emphatically announced that he would boast in nothing other than the cross of Christ (Gal. 6:14); this alone could accomplish salvation. And this includes sanctification.

The Spirit takes and applies this work of Christ in conversion, regenerating, convicting and bringing sinners to repentance and faith. They hear the gospel preached. They believe. They are united to Christ. They receive the forgiveness of their sins. And they are placed securely among

¹ 'Preaching', of course, must not be restricted to 'pulpit work'. See my *The Priesthood of All Believers; Pastor*.

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the sanctified. Paul, writing to the Corinthians and defiantly standing up to the law men, those who wanted to bring the early believers under the Mosaic law, put it like this:

God... has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life... Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said: 'Let light shine out of darkness', has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3:5-6, 17-18; 4:1-6).²

As the apostle told the Thessalonians:

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 and belief in the truth. To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thess. 2:13-14).

It could not be clearer: sanctification actually precedes belief in that extract! The fact is, as with the believer's union with Christ, his positional sanctification is simultaneous with believing. Moreover, as Paul explained, the believer is brought

² See my *Glorious* for my examination of this tremendous passage, what moved the apostle to write it, and its implications for us today.

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to faith and sanctification by the call of the gospel; that is, he is positionally sanctified by the effective inward call of the Spirit, the regenerating work of the Spirit. All of it, therefore – regeneration, effectual calling, union to Christ, positional sanctification – is the believer’s experience at one and the same moment; namely, at his conversion.³

The writer to the Hebrews set it all out very fully. The believer’s sanctification flows directly from the priestly work of Christ in the sacrifice of himself on the cross; it is accomplished by it. Sanctification is based absolutely on Christ’s finished work:

We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected⁴ for all time those who are being sanctified.⁵ And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying: ‘This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds’, then he adds: ‘I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more’. Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin (Heb. 10:10-18).

Since the believer is perfectly sanctified by the high priestly, sacrificial work of Christ, in Christ the believer is utterly free from sin, released from the law, having died to it from the world, delivered from all condemnation and every accusation (Rom. 6:14-15; 7:4-6; 8:1-4,33-34). He is completely and irretrievably established among the people of God, separated unto God. This is what ‘being positionally sanctified’ means. As Paul opened his letter to the Corinthians:

³ Justification is also included, but Paul does not mention it here.

⁴ That is, positionally sanctified.

⁵ That is, progressively sanctified.

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To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints... You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Cor. 1:2; 6:11).

This clearly speaks of the believer's positional sanctification, not his moral change as a result of conversion. Do not miss the point of Paul's (unique) opening statement when beginning his letter to the Corinthians. I draw attention to this uniqueness, because Paul wrote these staggering words to the Corinthians – the Corinthians of all people! A more disorderly set of believers you could hardly wish to meet, yet they were, Paul declared, sanctified in Christ Jesus by the Spirit of God! This, in itself, is highly instructive as to what positional sanctification is.

Writing to the Ephesians, Paul declared:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory (Eph. 1:3-14).

As he went on to say:

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Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her,⁶ having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself⁷ in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish (Eph. 5:25-27).⁸

As these extracts show, every believer, at the point of faith, is at once perfectly sanctified, utterly separated unto God, irretrievably separated from the world and Satan, constituted sinless in God's sight, and accounted such. Every believer is made a saint, is a saint. And he is such in and through Christ. Christ himself is the believer's sanctification. Writing to the Corinthians, the apostle declared:

You are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption (1 Cor. 1:30).

And this is because Christ himself is the new covenant:

I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness (Isa. 42:6-7).

I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people (Isa. 49:8).

In other words: 'Christ is all' (Col. 3:11).

⁶ Calvin: 'That he might separate it to himself; for such I consider to be the meaning of the word "sanctify". This is accomplished by the forgiveness of sins, and the regeneration of the Spirit'.

⁷ Clearly, Paul is speaking of positional sanctification (in the eyes of God) and not progressive sanctification (in the eyes of men).

⁸ This is not to be shuffled off to ultimate (absolute) sanctification. It includes it, of course, but it cannot be confined to it. See my *Four 'Antinomians'*. While the above extract refers to positional sanctification, the context of Eph. 4 – 6 is progressive sanctification. Indeed, Eph. 5:25-27 and its context are key in coming to a biblical understanding of the believer's fivefold sanctification. And that is why I included it in my epigraph.

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This is positional sanctification. It has nothing to do with the believer's feelings, his works or moral development. It is all of grace in Christ, and is received by faith, and cannot be increased or diminished, but is perfect at once and permanent. By this sanctification, by the power of the Spirit, God absolutely delivers the believer from Satan's dominion, and irretrievably sets him apart from the world. Thus God views every believer as perfect through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. This, of course, is why no New Testament believer is ever addressed as a sinner, or spoken of in that way; the New Testament always speaks of him as a saint. In himself, it goes without saying, he is a sinner still, but in Christ, in the new covenant, he is a saint.⁹ He really is in Christ, and so he is actually, completely, righteous in God's sight.¹⁰

An interesting question arises at this point, one I have been hinting at in passing. What is the connection between positional sanctification, justification¹¹ and regeneration? I should put it the other way round: What is the connection between regeneration, justification and positional sanctification? And what are their differences, the distinctive meanings of each? Whereas all three speak of the initial work of grace in the believer, the three words speak of three distinct nuances within that work. Why three? The reason, to state the obvious, is that the work of grace is too rich, too vast, to be confined to just one simple description. God surely accommodates himself and his work to our feeble understanding.

⁹ See Rom. 8:27; 1 Cor. 14:33; Eph. 1:1,18; Phil. 4:22; Jude 3; *etc.* And even though he uses 'am' in 1 Tim. 1:15, Paul may be talking of what he was before conversion. Whatever the rights and wrongs of that, it is his estimate of himself. He never addressed fellow-believers in this way, or described them thus.

¹⁰ See my *Four 'Antinomians'*.

¹¹ I am talking about actual justification. In contrast to sanctification, justification is fourfold; there is no 'progressive justification'. See my *Eternal*.

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Let me briefly mark the differences and distinctive properties of the three aspects of the change that takes place in the sinner's status before God as he is converted.

Regeneration speaks of the work of the Spirit giving the dead sinner life, and thus forming within the believer a new mind, a new will, a new heart, disposition, attitude and desire. The believer is a new man, a new creation or new creature (2 Cor. 5:17), a spiritual man as opposed to a natural man. He is in the Spirit, no longer in the flesh (Rom. 8:4-9). As an unregenerate man, a natural man, a sinner, he hated God and his word, had no concept of spiritual matters since he was dead in sins (John 3:3-8; Rom. 8:5; Eph. 2:1-6, for instance). But as the Spirit regenerated him, all this was immediately, instantly and irreversibly changed (1 Cor. 2:11-16; 2 Cor. 5:17). This is what Paul is referring to when he speaks of those:

Who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him (Rom. 8:4-9).

No one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. 'For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?' But we have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:11-16).

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Justification describes the believer's position within the new covenant in legal terms, forensic terms. It is the language of the courtroom; that is, in Christ Jesus God fully acquits the believer of all guilt of sin and condemnation, declaring, accounting, constituting, making him fully righteous in his sight (Rom. 5:19).¹²

Positional sanctification, as I have explained, speaks of the separation of the believer from the world, his change of status before God. Again, as I have noted, this is illustrated, typified, by Israel's deliverance from Egypt, Israel's separation from all other nations.

But, and here we meet a vital point, if we stop at the old-covenant picture of positional sanctification, as some do, we shall fall grievously short of both its new-covenant fullness and its far-reaching effect in the believer's life. Israel was separated from all the other nations, yes, but the overwhelming majority of the Israelites were unregenerate. Some – David, for example – were, by anticipation, in the new covenant, but the majority were not. Now, 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 God – and gives them a new heart in their regeneration, and this leads them to an essential and inevitable progressive sanctification.¹³ Alas, this vital point concerning the believer's progressive sanctification is, on occasion, denied. This mistaken view is supported by confining positional

¹² Calvin: 'A man will be justified by faith when, excluded from the righteousness of works, he by faith lays hold of the righteousness of Christ, and clothed in it appears in the sight of God not as a sinner, but as righteous. Thus we simply interpret justification, as the acceptance with which God receives us into his favour as if we were righteous; and we say that this justification consists in the forgiveness of sins and the imputation [to us] of the righteousness of Christ' (Calvin: *Institutes* 3.11.2).

¹³ By 'essential and inevitable', I mean that the believer is responsible and accountable to God for his obedience to Scripture, and that the believer will be moved to obedience by the inward work of the Spirit.

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sanctification to its old-covenant picture. I repeat a note from the ‘Preamble’:

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.

Let me quote two passages from the prophets predicting the new covenant, both of which make this very point:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: *I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.* And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying: ‘Know the Lord’, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more (Jer. 31:31-34).

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I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. *And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules* (Ezek. 36:25-27).

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

To return to the positional sense: sadly, as I have said, this great doctrine is far too little thought about, and is only meagrely understood, appreciated and *consciously used* by most believers. So much so, I want to do what I can to help fellow-believers enjoy the riches of our inheritance in Christ, and show them how they must 'consciously use' it in their ongoing spiritual experience.

Before I get to that, however, let me set out the two remaining aspects of sanctification, beginning with progressive sanctification. In my *Christ is All*, in making what I called 'An Important Clarification', I pointed out that:

The elect, immediately they are brought into Christ by faith, are fully, absolutely, perfectly, utterly, completely, irreversibly and permanently sanctified... by the application of Christ's work to them by the Holy Spirit (see, for instance, 1 Cor. 1:2,30; 6:11; 2 Thess. 2:13; Heb. 2:11; 10:10,14,29; 13:12; 1 Pet. 1:2; Jude 1).

In other words, positional sanctification. But, as I immediately went on to say:

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Scripture [also] teaches that believers are new creatures in Christ, and that this new life will show itself – must show itself – by their growth in grace and in the knowledge of their Lord and Saviour, Christ Jesus. Indeed, this new life, and its development, is the cardinal evidence of their saved condition; without it, their profession is false (see, for instance, 2 Cor. 5:17; 7:1; Phil. 3:12-16; Col. 3:10; 1 Thess. 4:3; 2 Pet. 1:5-11). In other words, believers must be sanctified!... When Scripture speaks of ‘holiness, without which no one will see the Lord’ (Heb. 12:14), it is not referring to that [positional]¹⁴ sanctification which the elect have upon believing, but to ‘progressive sanctification’, to personal godliness; the context of Hebrew 12:14 is invincible proof that it is so...¹⁵ Scripture calls upon the saved sinner to work out his salvation by God’s grace in the power of the Holy Spirit (Phil. 2:12-13). Furthermore, while it is the believer’s duty and privilege to obey God in this command – he is responsible for the ‘perfecting [of his] holiness in the fear of God’ (2 Cor. 7:1) – he has the assurance that, under the terms of the new covenant, the Spirit will inevitably move him to it, and enable him to do it, so that he can join the apostle in declaring: ‘By the grace of God I am what I am’. Again, whatever good is accomplished by, through, and in the believer, he with Paul can only say it was ‘yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me’ that did it (1 Cor. 15:10). Finally, with the writer to the Hebrews, all believers must pray: ‘Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make [us] complete in every good work to do his will, working in [us] what is well

¹⁴ In my *Christ* I called this ‘absolute’ sanctification. I now want to reserve this for the believer’s ultimate sanctification in glory.

¹⁵ Heb. 12:14 is a vital text. It is located in a letter in which, with majestic cogency, its inspired writer establishes the believer’s positional sanctification (the climax coming in Heb. 10:14), and his absolute sanctification (Heb. 11:40; 12:23) in Christ. It is in light of these two sanctifications that the writer calls so definitely for the believer to live out his status in Christ and show it by his progressive sanctification or holiness (Heb. 12:10,14; see also, for instance, Heb. 13:15-25).

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pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory
for ever and ever. Amen' (Heb.13:20-21).¹⁶

And that is progressive sanctification.

¹⁶ See my *Christ* p11.