

All Five Sanctifications Linked

Taking God's electing decree as fundamental to every aspect of the believer's saving experience,¹ nowhere is this combination of the various sanctifications more evident than in Paul's magnificent affirmation in Romans 8:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Note how Paul used his opening declaration concerning the believer's positional sanctification: 'No condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus... Set... free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death... The righteous requirement of the law... fulfilled in us', to move, without any break, straight into progressive sanctification: 'Fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit'. He went on:

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. But if Christ is in

¹ True, in the first of the following extracts, Paul did not spell out the believer's election immediately – rather, opening with 'no condemnation' – but election is always there in the background, and, openly, not far away: 'Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies' (Rom. 8:33). And, of course, we have Rom. 9 and 11, where election plays such a vital role.

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you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry: ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him (Rom. 8:1-17).

Note the apostle’s move into the believer’s absolute sanctification: ‘That we may also be glorified with him’; if we include Romans 8:33, all five sanctifications are clearly linked: the believer has been glorified, is being glorified and will be glorified, and all because God elected him to glory in eternity past.

Paul summarised the position:

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified (Rom. 8:29-30).

Romans 8 is not the only passage where we meet at least two of the five sanctifications within one context:

To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints [holy in life] together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours (1 Cor. 1:2).

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

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transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:5-18).

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said: 'I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty'. Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God (2 Cor. 6:14 – 7:1).

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... Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish (Eph. 1:3-4; 5:25-27).

We know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction... And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come... May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we

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do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints (1 Thess. 1:4-10; 3:12-13).

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure (1 John 3:2-3).

Do not miss the trinitarian aspect of all this new-covenant work, nor its gracious nature. Fivefold sanctification, first in God's decree and then in the believer's experience, in its commencement, continuance and completion, is always ascribed to God's decree accomplished in Christ, and said to be applied by the Holy Spirit, all of it being in and through the grace of God.

Peter, in his first letter, powerfully joined all five aspects of the believer's sanctification. Before I give the extracts in full, let me distil the essence, let me draw out the leading points: Believers are sanctified by the Spirit, taking them to the person and work of Christ, being elect, 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for [God's] own possession... Once [they] were not a people, but now [they] are God's people'; that is, having been elected to salvation (including sanctification), they are in due time positionally sanctified. But their positional sanctification has to be made known in the world. And the new covenant ensures precisely that: believers are elected to be positionally sanctified in order 'that [they] may proclaim the excellencies of him who called [them] out of darkness into his marvellous light'. They have to proclaim Christ's excellencies to the pagans, the Gentiles, among whom, and like whom, they once lived, doing so 'as sojourners and exiles' among them, always 'preparing [their] minds for action, and being sober-minded, [setting their] hope fully on the grace that will be brought to [them] at the revelation of Jesus Christ', and so on. In other words, Peter clearly sets out purposed sanctification, accomplished sanctification, positional sanctification, progressive sanctification and absolute sanctification.

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Here are the passages in full. I begin with Peter's statement that it all starts with God's electing eternal decree:

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who are elect... according to the foreknowledge of God the Father...

At God's appointed time, the Spirit brings elect sinners, through faith, into their positional sanctification in Christ:

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who are elect... according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you.

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Pet. 1:1-2; 2:9-10).²

That is the believer's new-covenant position in Christ; in other words, his positional sanctification. Having been elected, having been brought by the Spirit to be a member of the holy nation, the *ekklēsia*, the special, distinguished and separated people of God, he is once and for all separated from the world, sin, death and darkness. But as Peter also made clear, the believer has to grow in progressive sanctification. As the apostle said, God has done all this – brought sinners into positional sanctification – and now... as a consequence, therefore... as believers, they have to work out before men their status before God by their progressive sanctification:

Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written: 'You shall be holy, for I am holy'. And [since] you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves

² I said I would return to this very important statement.

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with fear throughout the time of your exile... Put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation... As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honourable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation (1 Pet. 1:13-17; 2:1-12).

This is what Peter expects the believer to be in his profession of Christ. He insists on it. The child of God must show his election and positional sanctification to the watching world by his progressive sanctification. Indeed, by his life he must preach Christ to the pagan world from which he has been separated, challenging it with Christ, confronting it with the gospel. Peter went on:

Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh,³ arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God. For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you;

³ This is a very important statement. The best commentary on it is Rom. 6:1-14. 'Suffered in the flesh' means 'died'. The believer, in Christ, has died to sin, the world, death and law (Rom. 7:4-6; Gal. 2:20; 5:24; 6:14).

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but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead (1 Pet. 4:1-5).

John Brown commented:

Let Christians seek clearer views, more settled convictions, respecting the death of Christ as the great atoning sacrifice, and their own interest in it as not only the price of their pardon, *but the means of their [progressive] sanctification*; and let them open their minds and hearts to all those powerful motives, from such a variety of sources, which urge them to live devoted to him who died devoted[ly] for them; to glorify him whom they have so long dishonoured; to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, and to live soberly, righteously and godly in the world; constantly seeking to be more and more disconformed to this world, by being more thoroughly transformed by the renewing of their minds, and proving the good, and perfect, and acceptable will of God.⁴

Brown was commenting on 1 Peter 4:1, which he translated as: ‘Arm yourselves with this same thought’, the ‘thought’ being: ‘He that has suffered in the flesh has been made to rest from sin’. Brown rightly argued that Peter was saying the same as Paul in Romans 6. ‘Reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord’ (Rom. 6:11). In other words, progressive sanctification comes as believers think of their union with Christ, and the benefits which flow from it. This ‘thought’ is ‘the instrumental means of sanctification’:

‘This thought’ being in our mind, habitually in our mind, is essential to our [progressive] sanctification. We cannot be [progressively] sanctified if it is not in our mind; and, if it really is habitually in our mind, [progressive] sanctification is a matter of course.⁵

Excellent!

Returning to Peter: even as he was setting out the necessity of the believer’s progressive sanctification, the apostle spoke

⁴ Brown: *1 Peter* Vol.2 p318, emphasis his.

⁵ Brown: *1 Peter* Vol.2 pp270-321. See also Vol.1 pp220-221,318-319.

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of the believer's absolute sanctification; namely: 'the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ' (1 Pet. 1:13). Again: 'Rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed' (1 Pet. 4:13; see also 1 Pet. 5:1). 'After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen' (1 Pet. 5:10-11).⁶

Nor is it without significance that the Spirit moved Peter to give us, within this extended work on sanctification, the clearest biblical statement concerning believers as living stones in the building of the new temple, and their priesthood the priesthood of all believers within that temple.

Here, then, we have the believer's fivefold sanctification in the new covenant: his sanctification in God's purpose, his accomplished sanctification, his positional sanctification, his progressive sanctification and his absolute sanctification. And they are inextricably linked.

There are many similarities between the third and fifth sanctifications – positional and absolute: they are, in essence, one and the same. If positional sanctification is the believer's sanctification in the bud, his absolute sanctification is that which he will have in the full ripening of harvest at Christ's coming. Every believer is positionally sanctified in Christ at the point of faith, and will be absolutely sanctified in Christ at his appearing. Neither of these sanctifications can be increased or diminished. They are both perfect, absolute, at once and for ever. Both arise through, and are grounded in, God's grace in Christ, and involve no effort whatsoever on the believer's part. As I will show,⁷ when the believer rightly appreciates and, as I have said, *consciously uses* both, they bring him assurance and lead to progressive sanctification, practical godliness. They also enable him to take a proper view of fellow-believers;

⁶ This is only a selection of passages – see Peter's entire first letter (and his second).

⁷ In the forthcoming volume, as I have explained.

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namely, as saints. And so on. These are rich consequences.
Augustus Toplady:

*How vast the benefits divine
Which we in Christ possess!
We're saved from guilt and every sin,
And called to holiness.*

*'Tis not for works which we have done,
Or shall hereafter do,
But he of his abounding love
Salvation does bestow.*

*The glory, Lord, from first to last,
Is due to thee alone;
Aught to ourselves we dare not take,
Or rob thee of thy crown.*

*Our glorious Surety undertook
Redemption's wondrous plan;
And grace was given us in him
Before the world began.*

*Not one of all the chosen race
But shall to heav'n attain;
Partake on earth the purposed grace,
And then with Jesus reign.*

In this small volume, I cannot explore all these consequences, these 'vast benefits', as Toplady aptly described them. What I am really interested in at this time is the connection between, on the one hand, the believer's positional and absolute sanctification, and, on the other, his assurance and progressive sanctification. There is more than a *connection* between them. The truth is, when the New Testament speaks of 'sanctification' (using the word itself), its undoubted emphasis is on the positional aspect, and it makes it clear that in the new covenant, both the believer's assurance and progressive sanctification are nurtured by his looking back to his positional sanctification, and on to his absolute sanctification. By taking a proper, biblical view of what he is now and what he will be in Christ, therefore, the believer finds assurance, and is moved to godliness. This, I am afraid, is not always appreciated as it

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should be. For this reason, it is these two vital consequences of a proper understanding of sanctification that I wish to address in my forthcoming volume.