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## *The Sources of Our Sanctification*



*Tom Wells*

**T**he word *piety*, if I understand it correctly, refers to the devout attitudes and feelings that a Christian believer must have and cultivate toward God the Father, Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is a fair reading of Scripture to say that the new birth brings such attitudes and feelings with it. Every Christian may truly say, "I love him because he first loved me." Without such love Christianity in an individual is but a shell of the real thing. Piety accompanies the first breaths of the Christian life as the new believer is born into the family of God.

Piety, however, must also be cultivated. As with all else that the Father works within believers at the outset of their Christian life, there is a process of growth and development that must follow the initial gift. The goal is to be like the Lord Jesus in all one's moral character. The process that targets this goal is called by theologians *sanctification*. Hence, the title of this article, *The Sources of Our Sanctification*. If we must be sanctified, how shall we go about it? Or, alternately, how shall God work this conformity to his Son within our daily lives?

This question came home to me recently in reading a book titled, *The Weakness of the Law*.<sup>1</sup> The book is further defined as a "timely defense of the third use of the law," as set forth by the leaders of the Reformation and especially John

Calvin. In brief, the *third use* was the usefulness of the moral law in promoting the sanctification of the believer. In the author's words, "The first two uses are the condemnation of unrighteousness in the sinner, and the social role of restraining those who are particularly unruly. The 'third use' refers to the function of the moral law as the pattern of life for the believer." The moral law (or the Ten Commandments), in this view "exercises a key role in sanctification when employed by the Holy Spirit"<sup>2</sup> From the days of the Reformation, until the present hour, Bible students have sought to pinpoint the sources of the believer's sanctification. What tools does God use, and what tools does he put into the hands of his people, to promote the various facets of their sanctification, including the growth of piety? The question is just as pressing today as it was at any time in history.

We start with documenting from Scripture the goal of the Christian life. Paul describes it in these words, "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he [the Son] might be the firstborn within a large family" (Romans 8:29). Here Paul puts it plainly: the goal of the Christian life is to be made like the Lord Jesus. This will include, of course, other things besides conformity to the Lord Jesus' moral character, for example, a glorified body. But no doubt a major part of this goal is moral and spiritual change. God has made us his sons, as Jesus is his Son, so that we would bear the family likeness. That lies on the face of the passage.

We need to know something more than the goal, however. We need to see that we reach it by a process. That is, God does not wait till our deaths to work this renovation in us. Instead, he works on it day and night in our lives. Two more statements by Paul bear this out. Speaking to believers at Philippi, Paul says, "It is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (2:13). To the Corinthians he writes, "And all of us [Christians], with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord,

the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:14). The work of God in the Christian goes on throughout the Christian life, making the believer more like the Lord Jesus little by little. So *sanctification* is a life-long process. Our question again is, what does God use in our lives to continue approaching the goal of likeness to Christ?

To discuss the sources of our sanctification I would like to move from the general to the particular. I will start with an all-embracing answer before we look more closely at the details.

#### AN ALL-EMBRACING SOURCE OF SANCTIFICATION

The all-embracing answer to this question is found in reflecting on both Romans 8:28 and 8:29. Here they are together:

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. 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 within a large family.

Let me make several points here. First, you will see that while the order of the verses obscures it slightly, verse 28 is a conclusion based upon the truth in verse 29. Paul's argument goes like this: Since God has predestined believers to be like Jesus, he has put a plan into place that will foster that goal. The plan is this: God will make everything the Christian experiences work for the believer's "good." If we ask what that "good" is, the context defines it as being like the Lord Jesus.

Second, our Christian experience bears this out by eliminating many other "goods" that might first occur to us when we read these verses. Let's name some of them, starting with *health*. Do all things we experience work together to give us good health? We might wish it were so, but it isn't. Some of God's choicest saints have borne the burden of ill health through most of their lives. Romans 8:28 certainly does not promise us good health. Or take prosperity. Other things being equal (they never are, of course!), to prosper economically is a

great good. But it is not the good promised in this passage. If Paul meant that prosperity was what God works for all his people, Paul's own life would have proved the idea false. Here is his testimony: "I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need" (Philippians 4:12). Paul actually knew very little of prosperity after he came to Christ. Instead he knew want and suffering. That was no accident. The Lord told Ananias about Paul, "I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Acts 9:16). And suffer he did! We could continue on through various other "goods" that God has not promised, but it is unnecessary. In each case we would get the same result.

The third point is the critical one for our discussion. Romans 8:28 tells us in no uncertain terms that God uses everything that happens to us to further our sanctification. The first source, then, is all-embracing. No wonder that "we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Romans 8:37)! What can defeat the Christian, if his every experience does him good by making him more like Christ? Our first answer to the question of the sources of our sanctification is a glorious one. It is full of encouragement and help for the weakest believer.

#### ANOTHER SOMEWHAT COMPREHENSIVE ANSWER

The second source of our sanctification is probably the one most Christians think of first, the Bible, the Word of God. Many of us are immediately propelled toward this answer by remembering the request of the Lord Jesus. Praying to his Father he said, "Sanctify them through thy truth; thy word is truth" (John 17:17 KJV). The thought in this verse, however, is somewhat narrower than the sanctification of believers everywhere and at all times. Here sanctification refers to the original followers of Christ in their mission to the world. (The transition to all believers comes in verse 20 where Jesus extends his prayer: "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those will believe in me through their word. . . .")

But the sanctification of the apostles to their task entailed godly living, like Jesus' own, as a means to the conversion of others. This is already implied in the promise of persecution for Jesus' sake (John 15:18-25). It is put beyond all doubt, however, by Jesus' words, "I give you a new commandment that you love one another. . . . By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35). So in principle their sanctification to service was not all that different from our own. We, too, are sent into the world, and we too must follow this command and cherish its promise. And when we are taught to "Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness [sanctification] without which no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14), we discover that sanctification is our responsibility. No evangelical Christian will doubt that our main resource must be the inerrant Word of God. The only question that we must answer is this: what portion(s) of God's Word will best serve to make us like the Lord Jesus? And here, historically, the debate suddenly becomes hot and heavy!

#### TWO HISTORICAL ANSWERS

Earlier I mentioned the book, *The Weakness of the Law*. One valuable feature of it is a survey of what has been called "the antinomian controversy" in the English-speaking world. Starting with the Puritans in the sixteenth century and running right into our own day, Jonathan Bayes describes this debate.

The point at issue may be summarized as follows: does the moral element in the law of the Old Testament continue to have binding force and directing power in the life of the believer, such that it exercises a key role in sanctification when employed by the Holy Spirit, or does the Holy Spirit work directly, or, if he employs any means at all, is the gospel of justification by grace through faith in Christ the sole and sufficient instrument of sanctification? This latter position has been called "doctrinal antinomianism," and must be distinguished from "practical antinomianism." The issue is not whether Christians ought in practice to keep the law, but

whether the law is itself a means to this end.<sup>3</sup>

I have quoted Bayes at length to show some of the options Christians have adopted over the centuries:

- 1) Some Christians have said that the Bible is not a source of sanctification at all, since the Holy Spirit creates sanctification directly, without using means.
- 2) Other have said that the Spirit uses the gospel alone to promote sanctification.
- 3) Still others have given a key role to the moral law (often equated with the Ten Commandments) in producing sanctification.

#### WHO IS RIGHT, HERE?

It seems clear to me that all three are right, except when they eliminate each others' positions. There seems to be no need to make a choice here. Remembering again the all-embracing promise of Romans 8:28 should help us to see that truth. In fact, this seems so plain that it is hard to understand why there was controversy over it. Why didn't the problem simply disappear as time went on?

The answer is complex, but I will try to shed a little light on it.

First, it is obvious that the question of sanctification, like all theological questions, is involved closely with conclusions we draw on other theological issues. All reasoning is done from presuppositions. That is true in the case of the Bible. Once we think we know the meaning of an individual verse, we bring that meaning to the next verse we examine, and presuppose that the second verse cannot contradict the first. (I am describing, of course, the reasoning of those who believe in the full inspiration of Scripture. Others may not be put off by supposed contradictions.) In this way, each previous verse controls what we see in the next one we look at. Where that does not happen, our understanding of the latest verse may require a revision in our understanding of a previous verse or verses. In any case, while we may never cease learning from

Scripture, before long we come to hold a rudimentary "systematic theology" based on our study. When we add to this mixture the opinions about Scripture and theology that we have absorbed from others, we wind up with a fairly rich brew that we call "our convictions." (And may heaven help the man or woman who contradicts them!)

The point here is that "scholars" are not at all exempt from this process. The difference is that, by sheer dint of study, they eventually come to an enormous number of such convictions. Those convictions soon turn up in the form of commentaries on Scripture and the formal systematic theologies and creeds that become part of the heritage of each generation of Christians. The process is inevitable and it is not essentially evil. We may even describe it as "very good," as long as we realize that it is *never* perfect.

Now let me try to apply what we have just seen to these variations on the sources of sanctification.

One important doctrine strongly emphasized at the Reformation was the doctrine of justification by faith. Closely related to this, and destined to bring enormous difficulties in its wake, was the issue of the role of works in people's lives. That led to a problem. The strong emphasis on justification by faith alone produced a de-emphasis on works in the minds of many. In some important respects this was a healthy reaction to earlier distortion in the Roman Church. But trying to balance these two ideas, justification by faith and the necessity of good works, our forebears came to differing opinions. Some thought that the best way to guard against works-righteousness was to deny that Christians should apply themselves to righteous actions. This group was later represented in those who held position one (1) above. They agreed that Christians should produce righteous works, but thought that the Holy Spirit would see that it was done without human means. Others thought that the motivating power of the glorious gospel message would ensure that Christians would act righteously (as far as that was possible in a fallen world). This group was later represented by position two (2) above. Finally, many thought that preaching moral law was the best guarantee that

Christians would live righteous lives. This group was later represented by those who held position three (3) above. In Bayes' study this would be the typical Puritans of the seventeenth century. Of the three groups, this last group did not deny either the direct work of the Spirit or the profitableness of the gospel in promoting sanctification.

For many, these facts have made the Puritans the best models for promoting sanctification among Christians today. Indeed, if we had to choose between the three groups, given the Puritans' openness to the other views, we would have to take them as our exemplars. But there is more to be said.

In my judgment, there is nothing in Scripture that warrants *the amount* of emphasis the Puritans put upon moral law as a means of sanctification. (This is especially true when moral law is simply identified with the Decalogue as was common among the Puritans.) I have tried to show already that Romans 8:28 makes it very doubtful whether any one thing should be looked on as the preeminent means God uses. That does, of course, leave open the question that remains important to us: granting the direct work of the Spirit, what must *we* emphasize in our preaching and teaching from the Word of God?

This is a tough question to answer, but we can approach the answer best, perhaps, by making a few observations. First, we must emphasize that the ethic of the New Testament goes well beyond any fair reading of the Ten Commandments.<sup>4</sup> It is sometimes argued that the fuller revelation in the law of Christ is implicit in the Decalogue. It is hard either to defend or to deny this idea due to the ambiguity of the word *implicit*. But at the very least we must say that the New Testament extends the literal meaning of the Decalogue enormously. Even the rest of the Old Testament moves beyond the Ten Commandments in its increasing emphasis on inwardness as Israel drifts further and further from God and the doctrine of *the remnant* develops.

That said, a strong case can be made for large doses of both the law of Christ and the gospel of Christ, two sides of the same coin, as concurrent promoters of sanctification. The

reason is apparent: Christ's law shows the direction in which we must head, and his gospel keeps us from the weariness that leads ultimately to losing heart in the battle against sin. That is why the writer to the Hebrews exhorted his readers both to "pursue holiness" (12:14) and to do it by looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart" (12:2-3).

These words are our instructions. To "pursue" sanctification we must fix our attention on Jesus (cf. "looking to" him in verse 2 and "consider him" in verse 3). In fulfilling the Torah (Mosaic Law), Jesus Christ has become the object of our affections and the Master of our lives. In his example, in his teaching, and in the teaching of his agents (his apostles and prophets), we have the instruction and ethic that we need for this present age. His church is "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:20).<sup>5</sup>

#### WHAT ELSE BESIDES THE SCRIPTURES?

If we accept the work of the Spirit and the Word of God as the chief sources of our sanctification, are there other things referred to in Romans 8:28 that are important enough to mention individually. Let me suggest several.

One source of our sanctification with great potential for good is the prayers of others. This will, of course, include the intercession of Christ and the Spirit (Romans 8:26-27, 34), but I am thinking here of the prayers of other believers in Christ. The New Testament demonstrates this by the zeal with which the early church engaged in prayer for one another and also by the requests for prayer that dot its pages. In Acts 12 Peter is in prison, guarded day and night. But "while Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him" (12:5). Not only were their prayers answered, but Peter's faith

was increased. At first he thought his release was a vision (12:9), but shortly he realized that the Lord had specially blessed him. "Then Peter came to himself and said, 'Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hands of Herod and all that the Jewish people were expecting'" (12:11).

Paul often mentions his prayers for others, including their sanctification. To the Philippians he writes,

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God (1:9-11).

Note in these verses how Paul looks both at the process of sanctification and its ultimate goal. He prays for those things that will help them "to determine what is best" (1:10). Then he looks ahead to the day of Christ in which they will be found "pure and blameless" (1:10), and "having produced the harvest of righteousness" (1:11). More than that, he asks others to pray for him and other saints.

Always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak (Ephesians 6:18-20).

Paul was a man under orders. His sanctification included faithfulness to his Lord in preaching the gospel.

We must never forget that the model prayer that our Lord gave us teaches us to ask its petitions for our brothers and sisters as well as ourselves. The language is "Give *us* this day *our* daily bread. And forgive *us our* debts as *we* also have forgiven *our* debtors. And do not bring *us* to the time of trial, but rescue *us* from the evil one." Such requests as these promote the

sanctification of our fellow believers.

In history much has been said about the *sacraments* as sources of sanctification. The idea that has come to be associated with the word *sacrament* is the idea of a sacred sign or symbol that in one way or another conveys grace (i.e., gracious help from God) to the person who receives it. The Roman Catholic Church identifies seven different acts as sacraments that are alleged to have been instituted by the Lord Jesus. Protestants, on the other hand, confine the word to two practices, baptism and the Lord's Supper. Some use the word *ordinances*, things ordained by the Lord Jesus, instead of the word *sacraments*.

Do the sacraments or ordinances convey to believers God's gracious help toward sanctification? A cautious "Yes" seems to be the answer. The caution arises from the physical and material character of these actions. Physical actions and materials may enter our eyes, fall on our ears, or even enter our digestive systems with no spiritual effect whatsoever. So there can be nothing *automatic* about seeing or participating in either baptism or the Lord's Supper.

The "Yes" arises from the assumption that participants in the sacraments or ordinances know what these acts are about. When that is the case they function very much like the Word of God does. They convey truth. They are like visible words from God that convey to both participants and onlookers encouraging facts about our relation to Christ in his death and resurrection. Such facts, whether spoken or seen, promote love to God and gratitude to him for his grace among true believers.<sup>6</sup>

When we make progress in our Christian lives, we are said to be progressing in sanctification. That raises the question, do we then also grow in piety, the devout attitudes and feelings that a Christian believer wishes to cultivate toward the Triune God? Or is it possible for a true believer in Christ to fall into a barren intellectualism devoid of love to God?

The answers to these questions are not as simple as they may at first seem. Several things complicate them. First is the question of each believer's native temperament which reacts

both on themselves and others. Some are optimistic; others pessimistic. The question, "Do I love the Lord?" may haunt some who very much love Him. In this case, the judgment of others should be brought to bear on the question. On the other hand, another person may confidently boast of loving God and Christ, when others might well question their love.

Beyond that, we must think of what characterizes us and others. A Christian may suffer a season of barren spiritual feelings. But one swallow is not a summer, and one bout with a lack of warmth in feelings is not apostasy. Again, it is what *characterizes* us that is the important measure of our spiritual lives.

Finally, if piety is an attitude of love toward God, and it is, we must know what love is. Is love an attitude, a feeling of affection? Yes, it is. But it is not just any feeling of affection, however strong. It is an attitude or feeling of affection that leads us to seek the benefit of, or promote the interest of, another—in this case, God. Feelings or attitudes that do not move us to advance the program of God by obedience to his Word are delusive. On the other hand, where there is an earnest desire to obey God for God's own sake, we love him indeed. You need not take my word for it; here are the words of the Lord Jesus: "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them" (John 14:21).

Take heart!

#### Author

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#### Notes

1. Jonathan F. Bayes, *The Weakness of the Law* (Carlisle, United Kingdom:

Paternoster Press, 2000). The book is a useful addition to the discussion of the Christian and the law. Despite the suggestion of the title, however, in general it defends the traditional Puritan position.

2. *Weakness*, 4.

3. *Weakness*, 4.

4 This is too broad a topic to defend in a brief article such as this. There are many good works on the subject of law that have appeared in the last 20 years. Let me suggest one that is not at all widely known. John G. Resinger, *But I Say Unto You . . .* (Southbridge, Massachusetts: Crowne, 1989) available from Sound of Grace, 5317 Wye Creek Drive, Frederick, Maryland 21703.

5. The *prophets* in this verse are evidently the New Testament prophets. This is conceded by most modern commentators on the basis of the context. Ephesians 3:5 reads as follows: "In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit." The "prophets" here are the New Testament, or Christ's, prophets.

6. It is very important to emphasize that such acts must be understood from instruction based on the Word of God to be effective. This fact has made most evangelicals very skittish about multiplying symbolic acts beyond those authorized by Scripture. The meanings of baptism and the Lord's table are explained both by Scripture and, generally speaking, by the ministers that perform them. A symbol is a type of picture, but pictures are seldom self-explanatory. Where they are not understood they quickly minister to superstition.