



The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification

**Growing in Holiness by Living
in Union with Christ**

By

Walter Marshall

**A New Version,
Put Into Modern English**

By

Bruce H. McRae

**Wipf & Stock Publishers
Eugene, Oregon**

The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification:
Growing in Holiness by Living in Union with Christ

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I traveled a long, winding path to discover, and then to “modernize,” this version of Walter Marshall’s classic book, The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification. Several years ago, I heard one of the pastors under whom I grew up, Dr. C. John Miller, speaking of a book that had meant a great deal to him. He said that Dr. John Murray, late professor of systematic theology at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, had told him that it was the most important book on sanctification that had ever been written. The book was The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification.

Thus began my search to find a copy of the book. This was not an easy task, for it was long out of print. No used bookstore I checked had the book. Internet title searches in bookstores turned up empty. Therefore, my next stop was the theological library at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta. They had at least one copy, but there was just one problem – the book was in their rare book collection, and could only be read there in the library! The book was first published in 1692, and the version they possessed dated back to the mid-1800s. It was so fragile, I was not allowed to remove it from the library, let alone copy it!

The librarian at the Candler Library was kind enough to do an Internet library search looking for the book, and he was able to find several versions of the book in various libraries. The latest published date we found was 1954. One of the copies from a 1954 version was in the library at Covenant College, on Lookout Mountain, Tennessee, and I was able to procure it from there. It is that book which I have used to produce this new version of Marshall’s classic book.

The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification has recently been republished in its old language version, but the book’s relegation, for the most part, to rare book collections in dusty theological libraries, is something of a picture of what is happening in the church today. The great theme of Walter Marshall’s book is that Christians grow in obedience by the power of the gospel, not by their own strength. Christians are in union with Christ, and their Christian growth flows from this union, not from their own efforts. The gospel is essential for growth in holiness.

In our day, however, this truth that power for growth comes from the gospel of grace seems to be long forgotten, relegated to the dusty, “rare

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book” room of the church. Why is this the case? Probably because it sounds too easy! “Surely,” we think, “we must do something to pay God back for saving us by our diligent efforts to live holy lives!” Really?

The gospel says that through faith in Christ, you are completely forgiven of all your sins. Then, having been forgiven, you are called to sanctification by faith in Christ as well. Sanctification is the lifelong process of being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. All Christians agree on this point: Christians are called to pursue godly, holy living. On this point there is simply no debate. However, confusion sets in as soon as the question is asked, “How do Christians become holy? Where does the power for godly living come from?”

This question has been debated for 2000 years. In the Bible, the books of Galatians and Colossians address this question head on. Does godly living proceed from placing yourself back under the requirements of the Mosaic Law, as the Galatian Judaizers taught? Does holiness proceed from higher life mysticism, as the Colossian heretics taught? Paul’s answer in each case was an unequivocal “No!” Holiness comes from union with Christ. It comes from “Christ living in me” (Galatians 2:20). Godliness proceeds from living in Christ: “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness” (Colossians 2:6-7).

For the past two thousand years, the church has re-fought the battles of Galatians and Colossians. The church has produced many different teachings about the Christian life: asceticism, legalism, perfectionism, higher life and second blessing movements, etc. Other churches have emphasized discipleship, and many books have been published on the Christian disciplines. This is a critical emphasis for the church. However, many schemes of discipleship focus on methods of disciplining yourself for holiness. They hardly even mention union with Christ or the power of the gospel to produce holiness. Such schemes quickly become legalism. They leave those who attempt them frustrated, condemned, and powerless. They certainly give lip service to grace, but they do not put grace into practice to empower Christian living. It is always a message of “Grace, but...” “Yes, you are certainly saved by grace, **but** make sure you discipline yourself and live a good life if you really want to be **sure** God is happy with you....”

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The Apostle Paul was confident that gospel grace would empower God's people to live godly lives. "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good" (Titus 2:12-13).

He also said, "At one time, we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. This is a trustworthy saying. *And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good.* These things are excellent and profitable for everyone" (Titus 3:3-8).

For Paul, the gospel brings a double blessing: the forgiveness of sin **and** the power for holiness. As Augustus Toplady said in his famous hymn, "Rock of Ages cleft for me... be of sin the double-cure, cleanse me from its **guilt** and **power**." That is why Paul was so concerned that church leaders stress the grace of the gospel. *Only the gospel can empower obedience.* That is why every generation of the church must discover afresh the sufficiency of the gospel of grace, and the power of the cross of Jesus Christ both to save and to sanctify

There is currently something of a "grace awakening" in the church. Just as Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley and George Whitefield discovered the truth of the gospel and were spiritually energized, so now many are rediscovering the riches of grace. However, there is also a very healthy discussion going on. Legitimate questions are also being raised about Christian growth and sanctification: What exactly is our part in sanctification? Does the sufficiency of grace mean we do nothing at all? What is the place of the law? Are we supposed to keep it or not? What is the role of faith in sanctification? What is the role of the Holy Spirit in sanctification? What is the place of the "spiritual

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disciplines” in the Christian life? In short, how do God’s grace and our pursuit of Christian growth fit together?

These are all important questions. And when it comes to sanctification, people tend to fall into one of two extremes. On the one hand, people can fall into legalism – that is, they place human righteousness and human effort at the center of sanctification, and supplant the work of Christ and the Spirit. On the other had, people can fall into license – that is, they say, “since grace and forgiveness are free, it does not matter how we live; there is no need to keep the law.”

Christians must of course avoid both of these extremes – for neither one is true. The Bible is clear: Christians are saved totally apart from their works, through faith in Christ alone. The Bible is also clear about this: Christians are called, and empowered, to live holy lives, by that same faith. Christian growth is not a self-help scheme, where “God helps those who help themselves.” Christian growth is not like a weight loss program – it cannot be packaged into a simplistic, easy, do-it-yourself program located in the self-help section of a secular bookstore.

The issue of sanctification was obviously a hot topic during Walter Marshall’s day as well. He also was flanked by the two extremes just mentioned. In the terminology of his day, he had the Neo-Nomians on the one side, and the Anti-Nomians on the other. The Anti-Nomians (“the lawless ones”) said that since you are forgiven by free grace, you have no obligation to keep the law whatsoever. The Neo-Nomians grew up in reaction to the Anti-Nomians. As the word “Neo-Nomian” suggests, they brought in a “new law.” They became a party of “new legalism.” They did not want people to fall into the Anti-Nomian error, so they told people, “Yes, you are saved by the grace of Christ, **but** you must keep the law to guarantee your stake in Christ’s grace.” They had confused justification and sanctification. To try to keep people from falling into the cheap grace of Anti-Nomianism, they placed people back under the law again.

Walter Marshall addresses both of these extremes in his book. Marshall had been something of a legalistic Neo-Nomian himself, so he spoke from personal experience. In short, he says that neither of these extremes can help anyone live a holy life. Both extremes misunderstand the gospel. Both extremes snatch holiness away from the people who follow them. On the one hand, Lawlessness just flat-out tells people that they do not have to live a holy life. On the other hand, Legalism tells people that they have to live a holy life, but that they have to live a holy

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life apart from the grace of Christ, out of their own strength. As Marshall says over and over again in his book, legalism has no power to change anyone. **Legalism** turns people into **lawless** people, because they do not have Christ living in them! They have no power to obey!

The same two extremes are still present today, in various forms. However, the gospel gives a way far above either legalism or cheap grace. The gospel says, “grace is the power for holiness.” In order to bring this out, Walter Marshall emphasizes several ideas:

- ❑ If you have come to faith in Christ, you participate in two blessings: your sins have been forgiven, and you have received a new heart and a new nature through the filling of the Holy Spirit. You have become a “new creation.”
- ❑ As a Christian, you do not grow in holiness by “improving your flesh” through disciplined self-effort. You grow in holiness as you live out of your new nature. You grow in obedience as you live in union with Christ, and as Christ lives in you.
- ❑ You have a responsibility to actively pursue sanctification. How? You must continually live by faith in Christ who loved you and gave himself for you.
- ❑ In order to live the life of faith in Christ, you must vigorously pursue and participate in the means of grace God has given you to live by faith (Bible reading, prayer, repentance, church membership, the sacraments, etc.).

I first began to use Walter Marshall’s book when I served as a local church pastor. The key issue I faced in trying to disciple Christians for holiness was this: they constantly felt defeated and discouraged in their Christian lives because they had tried and failed to change so many times! Walter Marshall addressed this issue better than any other book that I had ever read. This is largely because Walter Marshall was a pastor himself, and he continually observed Christians all around him struggling – and failing – to grow in holiness. Because of the difficulty of the original language version, I found it necessary to rewrite the book in modern English, so that people could read it, understand it, and profit from it.

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Christians today desperately need to hear and understand the message of Walter Marshall's book. People need to understand how the life of grace truly will energize them for godliness. The main point of his book is that union with Christ by faith is necessary and sufficient for both our justification and our sanctification. The gospel of Christ is sufficient for both our forgiveness and our growth in holiness. We cannot rely on our own abilities for either one of them. As he says, the key error of the Christian life is that people *think that even though they have been justified by a righteousness produced totally by Christ, they must be sanctified by a holiness produced totally by themselves.* The message of this book will bring freedom and encouragement to many Christians who are struggling, and failing, in their Christian growth.

Who was Walter Marshall? He was born in 1628 in Weymouth, England. He was appointed as a parish pastor in England in 1661, but he had to leave when the British Act of Uniformity was passed in 1662. He then was called to pastor a congregation at Gosport, in Hampshire, where he labored until his death. He was considered an able preacher and a faithful pastor. It was during this time at Gosport that he wrote this book consisting of fourteen "Directions" about the Christian life. The book flowed out of his own personal experience, and his struggles to live a holy life. The book was only published after his death.

It is very helpful to know what gave rise to The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification in the first place. In Direction Six in his book, he wrote:

This doctrine of salvation by sincere obedience is one of the worst Antinomian errors there is. I hate it with a perfect hatred. I consider it my enemy, because it has been my enemy. I have discovered in my own experience the truth of what the apostle Paul says in Romans 6:14, that the only way to be freed from the slavery and dominion of sin is not to be under the law but under grace.

He is very clearly referring to his early life, when his religion was not a source of joy and consolation to him. His religion only caused him affliction and heartache. He had been very distressed about the state of his soul for many years, and he had tried to put his sins to death with many different methods. He had tried to gain peace of conscience by his own efforts, but his mental anguish only increased. He went around mourning in his soul most of the day, because his conscience felt so guilty all the time. He always thought that God was displeased and angry with him. He

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began to consult with some of his friends to try to obtain relief from his guilt, such as the Rev. Richard Baxter, of Kidderminster, who wrote The Reformed Pastor.

Next, he consulted with Dr. Thomas Goodwin, a very eminent Puritan theologian. Marshall opened up his heart to Dr. Goodwin. He mentioned several of his sins that were weighing heavily upon his conscience. After he had finished describing his sins, Dr. Goodwin replied in this way: “You have forgotten to mention the greatest sin of all: the sin of unbelief. You do not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ to forgive your sins, and to sanctify your nature.”

This reply was powerfully used by God to bring the issue home to Walter Marshall’s heart. He came to see the mistake he had been making, without even knowing it. He had been trying to establish his own righteousness. He was not submitting himself to the righteousness of God. He was acting just like the Old Covenant Jews. He was trying to attain his righteousness by the works of the law. He was not seeking his righteousness by faith.

After his conversation with Thomas Goodwin, Marshall began his journey of becoming freed from his fears, and from the spirit of bondage that had oppressed him for so long. He saw that at the root of all of his fears lay an evil, unbelieving heart. This evil, unbelieving heart was preventing him from attaining holiness, even though he was trying to attain holiness with all of his might. Once he came to understand his unbelief, he was soon able to believe the gospel from his heart. He determined from then on to study and preach Christ in his ministry. Over time, he grew in holiness, with great peace of conscience and joy in the Holy Spirit. He also determined to put in writing the lessons he had learned from the Scriptures, which he had found so powerful in giving him peace in his soul. The result was The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification.

Just before his death, Marshall said to people around him who had come to watch his departure, “I am dying with the full assurance of the truth, and in the comfort of that doctrine I have preached to you.” After a short pause, he uttered, with great emotion, these comprehensive words, “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” When he had spoken these words, he breathed his last, and he entered into his rest in the year 1680.¹

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The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification flowed right out of Walter Marshall's own personal experience, and his vast knowledge of Scripture. The book has been used to bring countless others to the same freedom which Marshall himself experienced. One such person was the poet and hymn writer William Cowper. He said in a letter to his cousin,

Marshall *is an old acquaintance of mine*. I have both read him and heard him read with pleasure and edification. The doctrines he maintains are, under the influence of the Divine Spirit, the very life of my soul, and the soul of all my happiness; that Jesus is a *present* Savior from the guilt of sin by his most precious blood, and from the power of it by his Spirit; that [even though we are] corrupt and wretched in ourselves, in him, and in *Him only*, we are complete.... I never met with a man who understood the plan of salvation better, or was more happy in explaining it.²

In his original version of The Gospel Mystery, Marshall did not use a polished, refined style of writing. James Hervey said that in Marshall's writing "we are not to expect much pathos of address, or any delicacy of composition. Here the gospel-diamond is set, not in gold, but in steel."³ Marshall's simplicity of style is now difficult to see because of the way the English language has changed over the past 300 years. The original version is extremely difficult to read. I believe that Marshall's book is so important, it needs to be re-discovered by the church. However, if this rich resource is to be recovered, it must be put into modern language. That is what I have attempted to do in this volume. In my edition, I have not altered any of Marshall's thinking. This version is essentially a word for word translation. I have not sought to edit out his repetition or produce a more "popular" version of his book. I have simply modernized the vocabulary where it was necessary to do so, and tightened the sentence structure.

In his introduction to the 1954 publication of The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification, Percy O. Ruoff gives an excellent summary of the value of Walter Marshall's classic book:

The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification (first published in 1692) has been submerged by an avalanche of minor and relatively unimportant literature on the subject. This classic is now rescued from regrettable obscurity, and put within the reach of modern students. Readers will look kindly upon its somewhat archaic structure, and eagerly search for the gold mines of spiritual truth

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within. It has been said that the author's style is obscure, and the arrangement of his massive argument is not the best. This is correct, but the reader gets a reward for patience. One writer has said – "The beauty of Marshall's book is that he makes the doctrine of our union with Christ our starting point in the Christian course;" and, "What a new direction would be given to the spiritual struggles of thousands if they could but receive the teaching which Marshall seeks so earnestly to inculcate."⁴

One word of advice as you read Marshall's book. Do not become frustrated with the book's structure and repetition. Grasp the main idea, which he expresses over and over again, relying upon his vast knowledge of Scripture: "You are more sinful than you can imagine! The doctrine of Original Sin is true! You cannot reform your flesh! You cannot become a better person by your own strength no matter how hard you try! But cheer up! If you are a Christian, you have come into union with Christ. Through faith in Jesus Christ you are forgiven. Through faith in Jesus Christ you are sanctified and made holy. Through Christ, you are a new creation! The Holy Spirit lives in you! Therefore, pursue the life of faith in Christ with all diligence!"

¹This summary of Walter Marshall's Life comes from Walter Marshall, The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1954), pp. 249-252.

²Ibid. pp. 263-264.

³Ibid. p. 260.

⁴Ibid. p. v.