

Devoted to God

Blueprints for Sanctification

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THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

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Introduction

There are already books on this subject. Why add to their number? Is there anything different about *Devoted to God*? It contains no novel teaching. But it sets out with a distinctive goal: to provide a manual of biblical teaching on holiness developed on the basis of extended expositions of foundational passages in the New Testament. By the end of the book we will have worked our way together through some of the most important biblical blueprints for building an entire life of holiness.

There is a wise adage that ‘it takes the whole Bible to make a whole Christian’. That, of course, is true. For another way of describing sanctification might be: learning how ‘to glorify God and enjoy him for ever’, to use the famous words from the Shorter Catechism. Spiritual growth certainly requires everything between Genesis 1:1 and Revelation 22:21.

It takes a long time to read the Bible, longer to know it well, and even a lifetime is too short to master it. But what if we were to take one of the central themes of the Bible—like holiness, or sanctification—select important passages on that theme, and then try to gain some mastery of them? Of course we would not cover every conceivable passage; we would not learn everything we need to know. But we would have built a foundation that otherwise might not have been there. We would be able to build on it securely. Or, to change the metaphor, we would have attached some Velcro®

¹ Velcro® is a registered trade mark of Velcro Industries and refers to the fabric hook and loop fastener invented by the Swiss engineer George de Mestral and first patented in 1955.

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strips into our minds that would help us to organize all of our future learning and enable it to stick in the proper places.

Or, think of it another way. If a group of young Christians were to ask you to do a Bible study with them on the New Testament's teaching on sanctification and holiness—would five or six passages immediately come to mind almost without you having to stop to think? You will probably find them in this book.

If there is a specific design and goal then in *Devoted to God* it is to fasten into our minds and hearts a number of these central passages that will create the possibility for exponential growth in our understanding of what sanctification is and how it is nurtured. Think of it as a box of Velcro® strips, each fashioned out of a single passage in the New Testament central to the subject.

In the main these passages focus on teaching that is given in the indicative rather than the imperative mood—passages that *describe* sanctification rather than passages that *command* it. This is not so much a 'how to' book as it is a 'how God does it' one. It is not dominated by techniques for growing in holiness.

In fact the New Testament has—at least compared with contemporary expectations—very little to say directly about the 'how-to' of the Christian life, although it is anything but lacking in the 'what to'. It is far more concerned with shaping our understanding, so that a new life style emerges organically, than it is with techniques—although, as we shall see, it certainly includes instruction on the way to a holy life, motives for living it, and, yes, indications of how this can be accomplished.

So the pages that follow invite you to give attention to the content and shape of some key passages in the New Testament. These passages are quoted throughout the book, but to facilitate reflection on them, they will be found in Appendix 5. They are not all equally easy to understand or to put into practice. But they have been selected out of the conviction that will be repeated again and

again, that transformed lives require renewed minds—a clear understanding of what the gospel is and how it works leads in turn to the development of new affections and a new lifestyle. Thus each chapter focuses on one of these passages.

I would like to encourage readers to give close attention to these passages, meditating on them, and even memorising their contents. Since all Scripture is ‘profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness’¹ we should expect illumination, challenge, and restoration along the way. But perhaps the most important fruit of our journey will be the cumulative effect of gaining a working knowledge of these central passages.

This approach reflects another conviction. We need to be able to retrace the biblical foundations of holiness for ourselves. Otherwise, to one degree or another, we end up creating our own personal brand of Christianity. We will then tend to fall into the trap of being guided by our own thoughts and feelings when what we most need is to be anchored to the basic foundation stones that Scripture sets in place.

A visitor to the contemporary church materialising from an earlier century would probably be struck by how enormously privileged we are. Many of us receive education until we are in our early twenties, while most of them left school by the time they were young teenagers. We each own a Bible (some with helpful study notes built in); if they owned a Bible it was in small print Elizabethan English. We carry entire theological libraries on our eReaders, have access to vast resources via the worldwide web; they perhaps owned one or two Christian books. And yet, if the truth be told, what might surprise them most is that their familiarity with God’s word, their knowledge of the key passages in the New Testament, the degree to which they had thought long and hard about what Scripture means and how it applies, would leave us feeling

¹ 2 Timothy 3:16.

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ashamed. They would be surprised how hard we find meditation on the word of God, how little we actually know of it and how poorly we have nourished ourselves from it. They might marvel at the extent to which evangelical Christianity has been infected by our age of narcissism and how subjective so many Christians have become. They might notice that many modern Christians are often too interested in the development of the self but little interested in the development of their understanding of the triune God—that we are, to use Luther’s expressive Latin phrasing, *incurvatus in se*, turned in upon ourselves.

Scripture can deliver us from this, and heal the spiritual curvature of the spine from which we suffer and enable us to walk tall in the world for God’s glory. If only we would learn as Christians to think more biblically, surely our lives, our churches, our work and our witness would be moved on to a new plane; and a new quality of Christian life and fellowship would become evident. We are keenly aware, surely, that while we share Paul’s conviction that the gospel is God’s saving power,¹ as individuals, families and churches we give all too little evidence to the world that we are being ‘saved’, that is to say, that we are in the process of being sanctified and made more like Christ.

So *Devoted to God* is a manual written to encourage those who read it to ‘strive ... for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord’.²

Writing is a solitary discipline. But no author is ‘an island, entire of itself’. Once again therefore I would like to express my gratitude to the publishers and their staff for their encouragement and for their commitment to these pages. And behind the scenes, my wife Dorothy and our extended family in different ways have provided the ‘back-story’ within which I have learned what I know about

¹ Romans 1:16-17.

² Hebrews 13:14.

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sanctification—even if it is all too little. I am grateful to them and for them, more than words can express.

I pray that reading these pages will do spiritual good; working on them has done me good and I am grateful for that blessing.

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The Ground-Plan

The very mention of the word ‘sanctification’ can send a shiver down the spine; its Anglo-Saxon equivalent, ‘holiness’ even more so. After all, most of us feel we have failed frequently and badly just here.

But we need to begin further back than ourselves and our failures by asking two questions. The first: What does ‘holiness’ mean? And the second: What hope is there for me to grow in holiness and to make progress in sanctification?

What’s in a word?

Probably the most common explanation of the term ‘holiness’ is that to be ‘holy’ means ‘to be separate from’, ‘to be cut off from’, ‘to be placed at a distance from’. And so we often say that God’s holiness means that he is separate from sin and therefore separate from us.

There is a good measure of truth in this. But in my own view it starts from the wrong place. It describes the Creator’s attribute of holiness from the viewpoint of the creature; it describes his purity from the standpoint of the sinner. And ultimately that is to do our thinking the wrong way round. It may give us a partial perspective but not the entire picture.

Why is that true?

Any description we give of what God is like in himself—in technical terms, describing his ‘attributes’—must meet a simple test. For

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anything to be true of God as he is in himself it must be true quite apart from his work of creation, quite apart from our existence or even the existence of angels, archangels, cherubim and seraphim. It must be true of God simply as he always existed as the eternal Trinity. But in that case, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit had no 'attribute' that involved separation.

This is not to say that God the Trinity cannot be described as 'holy'. But it is to say that holiness cannot be *defined* as separation. Yes, there were personal *distinctions* within the fellowship of the Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Spirit), but there was no *separation*, no *being placed at a distance from* each other. In fact it would be nearer the mark to say that the reverse was true.

What then is God's holiness? What do we mean when we say 'Holy Father' and 'Holy Son' and 'Holy Spirit' and 'Holy Trinity'?

We mean the perfectly pure devotion of each of these three persons to the other two. We mean the attribute in the Trinity that corresponds to the ancient words that describe marriage: 'forsaking all other, and cleaving only unto thee'—absolute, permanent, exclusive, pure, irreversible, and fully expressed *devotion*.

When we grasp that this is true in the Trinitarian fellowship of God's being it will help us understand several things about holiness.

First, that it is not something mechanical, or formal, or legal, or even performance-based. It is personal. In a sense 'holiness' is a way of describing love. To say that 'God is love' and that 'God is holy' ultimately is to point to the same reality. Holiness is the intensity of the love that flows within the very being of God, among and between each of the three persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is the sheer intensity of that devotion that causes seraphim (whose holiness is perfect but creaturely) to veil their faces.¹

¹ Isaiah 6:2.

Ministers of the gospel often have the privilege of occupying 'the best seat in the house'. You see the whole congregation when you preach (it is interesting to discover that people sitting listening to you do not always realise that if they can see you then you can see them!). You stand looking out on the people you love when the church gathers round the Lord's table.

You also get a better view of a couple taking their marriage vows than any of the groomsmen or bridesmaids or even the parents do. You stand only a few feet away. You orchestrate the event close up and personal. And then the moment comes (even in traditions where it never used to!) when you say: 'You may now kiss your bride.' People always love that moment. Personally, at this point in the service, I usually experience a deep instinct to look down, to unfocus my gaze. This is a moment for two people who love each other. It is not the time for an outsider to their unique relationship to be watching. Yes, perhaps at a distance. But not from up close and personal; you do not belong there.

Perhaps the seraphim that surrounded the throne in Isaiah's vision of God in his majestic holiness felt the same way. To gaze on the sheer intensity of this flow of triune holy love would be to endanger themselves. They must distance themselves, cover their faces, and be separate. In that sense holiness does involve separation; but the separation is not in God the Trinity so much as in the sense his creatures have of what his holiness means.

We have other analogies in our human experience. In western society there remains a kind of unwritten etiquette that the act of a woman setting her lingering gaze on the eyes of a man and vice versa should be reserved for a relationship and commitment of the deepest intimacy. To attempt it outside of the bond of devotion that makes it appropriate is to sully it. If we may stretch the analogy: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit may 'lock eyes' with one another, and do so eternally. We however cannot bear that intensity. We can only

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see the face of God in a way that is accommodated to our creaturely capacity—in the man Christ Jesus.

If this is what holiness means *in God*, then *in us* it must also be a corresponding deeply personal, intense, loving *devotion* to him—a belonging to him that is irreversible, unconditional, without any reserve on our part. Simply put, it means being entirely his, so that all we do and possess are his. We come to think all of our thoughts and build our lives on this foundation.

If we ask, ‘But how can this definition of “holiness” apply to inanimate objects, such as the liturgical vessels of the Old Testament?’ the answer is at hand. They too were wholly devoted to the Lord; they were to be used for no other purpose because they existed for no other end than to be employed in his service for his glory. What is true of the ‘saint’ is true of everything the saints use.

To be holy, to be sanctified, therefore, to be a ‘saint’, is in simple terms to be *devoted to God*.

Can this be true for us? Robert Murray M’Cheyne often prayed ‘Lord make me as holy as a pardoned sinner can be made.’¹ If we are Christians then we too will have shared such desires. But we have failed so often. And the more clearly we understand what holiness is the more keenly we feel that failure. Is there any hope for us?

Can I hope for holiness?

When it comes to failure in sanctification, Simon Peter is probably the disciple with whom most of us can readily identify. John and Paul seem stable by comparison. Peter seemed to stumble more frequently, more seriously, and also more publicly—or at least we know more about his ups and downs.

Like Peter, most of us begin the Christian life with great hopes. We will be out-and-out for Christ; nothing will ever be allowed to dilute

¹ Andrew A. Bonar, *Memoirs and Remains of R. M. M’Cheyne* (1842; enlarged 1892; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 159.

our faith and commitment. But then, like Peter, we falter; sometimes we botch things up. Instead of being wholly yielded to Christ we discover instead that a stubborn and sinful resistance movement retains a foothold in our lives.

Again, we thought we would become fruitful, if not exactly famous, evangelists. But then our failures began. We had a God-given opportunity to say something about the Lord Jesus Christ but we felt it would be too embarrassing if we spoke. It wasn't quite as bad as Simon Peter. We didn't curse; we didn't actually *deny* that we belonged to Jesus. But when we escaped from the situation, we knew his eyes were watching us just as certainly as they watched Simon Peter the night he denied him. We may not have gone out and wept bitterly but we knew we had let Christ down badly.¹ And, at least momentarily, we shivered to remember his words: 'Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words ... of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'² And perhaps we wondered why he specifically mentioned being ashamed of his *words*.

Yet Peter, with whose failures we so easily identify, was restored. More than that, he made progress. Even more than that, he became an outstanding leader in the early Christian church. If anyone in the New Testament can teach us that even we can be devoted to God and make progress in holiness despite our past failings, it is Simon Peter.

Peter learned the hard way. This much is obvious from the words with which his first letter begins:

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, 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.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope

¹ Luke 22:54-62.

² Mark 8:38.

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through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ.¹

What is Peter saying?

Who am I, and what am I for?

When Peter wrote this first letter to churches located in modern-day Turkey, his readers were facing antagonism and persecution.

How would you begin such a letter? Perhaps with words of sympathy, saying how sorry you were that things had become so difficult? Not Simon Peter. He began first by reminding them of their identity in Christ and then by breaking into a doxology as he reflected on its implications.

Peter had perhaps learned from experience that when faced with challenges the most important issue is not the size of the challenge but the identity and character of the person who is facing them. He was all too keenly aware that he had stood only yards away from Jesus as he was facing crucifixion within a matter of hours, when he himself crumbled disastrously under the questioning of a young servant girl. Without explaining his approach to his first readers he addresses them in terms of their new identity in Christ. They are:

Elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, 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.²

¹ 1 Peter 1:1-7.

² 1 Peter 1:1-2.

They have been chosen (elect) through the love God had set upon them (foreknowledge) in order to be reserved by the Spirit (sanctification) with a view to their devotion to Christ (obedience) and the enjoyment of a life of covenant fellowship with him (sprinkled with his blood).

Peter's subliminal logic is: As you face life with all its trials do not lose sight of who you are and what you are for. Be clear about this and you will make progress. Forget this and you will flounder and fall. The reason? *Knowing (i) whose you are, (ii) who you are, and (iii) what you are for, settles basic issues about how you live.*

In the course of these pages we will see this principle expressed and applied in a variety of ways. It is foundational.

There is a great interchange in the Old Testament narrative of Moses' meeting with God at the burning bush. During his encounter with the Lord two questions arise: (1) in response to the Lord's words to him Moses asks, 'Who are you?' (2) In response to the Lord's calling he asks 'Who am I?' Everything that follows is dependent on the answers to these questions.

In our lives too, albeit in the lower case letters in which our biographies are usually written, the same questions are paramount. I need to be clear about who and whose I am, and what I am for in Christ. And Peter is teaching us how to answer them here. If you are a believer you are someone who has been chosen in grace, loved by the Father before you were born, and in your experience sanctified by the Spirit in order that you might become obedient to the Saviour who shed his blood to bring you into covenant fellowship with God. Using a completely different vocabulary Peter says to believers in Turkey exactly what Paul said to believers in Corinth: You are not your own; you have been bought with a price—the sacrifice of Christ; you are his, so live for his glory because it is for this that you have been purchased.¹

¹ 1 Corinthians 6:1-20.

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The biblical teaching on holiness, of life devoted to God, is simply an extended exposition of this basic statement.

But then, following this description of our identity Peter breaks into a doxology: ‘Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!’¹ What is the connection? It is that in Christ God has made all the provision that is necessary to develop our awareness of our new identity and to turn our destiny into a reality. Peter the stumbler had become Peter the encourager.

Encouragement

Peter’s doxology, although by definition God-directed (‘Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’) encapsulates the reasons why we bless him. In that sense it opens out into a whole series of reasons for these young Christians to be encouraged. Their lives were built on an overflow of God’s grace. They were the recipients of an entire catalogue of divine blessings. They had many more reasons to be encouraged than to be discouraged. So do we.

The first thing Peter wanted to clarify was the secure foundations on which the Christian life is built. What he says is so rich and health-giving it merits a book all of its own. As Martin Luther once wrote, this little letter contains virtually everything a Christian needs to know. The German reformer had a fine line in hyperbole. Nevertheless, Peter’s opening words constitute one of the New Testament’s most comprehensive descriptions of what it means to be a Christian. Here he lays the basic foundations for wholehearted devotion to God.

Why is holiness in this sense such an important topic?

(1) It is obviously important as a Christian *doctrine* because so much of the New Testament is taken up with expounding it.

(2) It is also important as an aspect of Christian *living* because the New Testament emphasizes that salvation is impossible without

¹ 1 Peter 1:3.

it. Thus the anonymous author of Hebrews urges us to ‘Strive ... for the holiness *without which no one will see the Lord*.¹

The necessity of a new life style

Justification (God counting us as righteous in Christ) and sanctification (God making us more and more righteous in ourselves) should never be confused. Nor is the former dependent on the latter.

We are justified in Christ by grace through faith. We are not justified on the basis of what we have accomplished, either before or after we become Christians. Nor are we justified on the basis of anything that has been done in us—not even what God has done in us by his grace. By contrast sanctification is something that is worked into us. We actually become holy.

Despite these important distinctions, the New Testament also stresses that justification and sanctification are both ours through faith in Jesus Christ. It is therefore not possible to be justified without being sanctified and then growing in holiness. This is why Hebrews says sanctification is essential, since without it none of us will ever see the Lord. In order to experience final salvation, sanctification is as necessary as justification.

Why is this? Simply because there is no justification without sanctification. Both are given in Christ—our new status is always accompanied by our new condition. Justification *never* takes place apart from regeneration which is the inauguration of sanctification. Put differently, if Christ is not Lord of our lives, sanctifying us, how can he have become our Saviour? Indeed unless we are *actually being saved* Christ has not become our Saviour. If he is our Saviour, the evidence of that will be—*being saved*; saved from the old life style into a new life style.

Here then is one of the most important basic principles of the gospel. We are not justified on the basis of our sanctification; yet

¹ Hebrews 12:14.

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justification never takes place without sanctification beginning. As John Calvin so well put it, they belong together because Christ was given to us for both. To separate them would be ‘to rend Him asunder’.¹

The dying thief—justification without sanctification?

But what about the dying thief—the criminal who turned to Jesus at the end of his life and asked for a place in his kingdom?² Surely he is the illustration *par excellence* of a man who was justified without being sanctified? He had no time to be sanctified.

In fact, this anonymous penitent turns out to be a powerful proof of the principle: no sanctification, no justification—no changed life, no changed status. For his justification was demonstrated by an immediate transformation. How so? He confessed his own sinfulness; he recognized Jesus’ lordship; his attitude towards him changed from despising him to respecting him; he prayed. Even more than this, he defended Jesus and rebuked his companion for the vitriol he heaped on his new-found Master. In the last moments of his life he demonstrated that he was a justified believer who was already in the process of being sanctified and prepared to see the Lord in Paradise. He was not justified on the basis of his sanctification but on the basis of God’s free grace. But neither was he justified without being sanctified.

But what exactly do we mean by ‘sanctification’?

¹ John Calvin, *Epistle of Paul to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, tr. Ross Mackenzie, ed. D. W. and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1960), 167.

² Luke 23:39-43.

The meaning of sanctification

In both the Old and New Testaments, the language used for sanctification contains the idea of being devoted to a special purpose, 'withheld from ordinary use, treated with special care'.¹

As you walk through a department store you may notice a piece of furniture with a one-word sign on it, 'Reserved'. You may see a similar sign on a table in a restaurant. Even if the piece of furniture is the only one left of the item you need, you may not have it! Even if there are no other tables free in the restaurant you may not sit at the table marked 'Reserved'. They are being kept for someone else (however frustrating that is for you). This is what 'sanctification' means: God has put his 'reserved' sign on something—temple vessels for example—or on someone who thereby becomes a 'saint', a person reserved for the Lord. He marks us out for his personal possession and use. We belong to him—and to nobody else, not even to ourselves. We become devoted to God.

It is sometimes suggested that there may be another idea hidden in the Bible's concept of holiness—that of brightness and shining, of intensity of light.

Holiness and light are often associated together in Scripture. Whatever is holy communicates a sense of light that shows up our darkness; it creates a sense of awe and unapproachability. Isaiah noticed this in his vision of the God of Holy-Love—the perfectly holy creatures who praised God for his holiness 'veiled their faces' as they did so.² There was a blinding brightness about God's *uncreated* holiness that was simply too intense for *created* holiness to gaze upon or bear.

Of course, whatever the precise nuance of meaning of 'holy', it involves not only belonging to God but being influenced by

¹ *Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. W. A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 3, 877.

² Isaiah 6:2-3.

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him—being claimed by him in order to be possessed by him and to become increasingly like him. In that sense holiness involves being separated off from whatever is sinful. The effect of this will be a new shining in our lives, a new brightness beginning to emerge. We may not detect it in ourselves; but we can observe it in others, and trust that the same is true of ourselves—as expressions of God’s grace and glory begin to appear in our lives.

This is why in the Old Testament holiness and beauty belong together.

Holiness is often seen as a rather metallic idea, perhaps tinged with hypocrisy or a ‘holier than thou’ atmosphere. By contrast Scripture teaches that holiness puts back into our lives the attractiveness of personal character for which humans were originally created but which has been so badly marred. Thus the Bible speaks about the *beauty* of holiness.¹ Since there is an infinite beauty in God,² when he makes us his personal possession reflections of the beauty of his holiness begin to appear in us too.

If this is what holiness means, then sanctification—making someone holy—is the work which God does:

- (1) To separate his people from what they were by nature in sin, and
- (2) To transform them so that their lives reflect his own being and character.

This is why sanctification is so central to the New Testament’s teaching. God is restoring in our lives the image which we were created to reflect.³

Knowing this produces in us both awe and praise.

There is *awe* because this work of God is so amazing but also so arduous. If you ever wonder why the Christian life turns out to be so

¹ 1 Chronicles 16:29; 2 Chronicles 20:21; Psalm 29:2; 96:9; 110:3.

² Psalm 27:4; 90:17.

³ Genesis 1:26-28; Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:9-10.

hard, and why many Christians find themselves saying, 'I thought I had difficulties before I became a Christian, but I seem to have even more since becoming one', then here is the answer: God is doing nothing less than changing you from what you were to what he means you to be—making you more and more like himself.

But there is also *praise*. For if God is changing you in this way to reflect the purity and glory of his Son, Jesus Christ, then surely you will want to sing his praises for such a privilege!

Peter's teaching

All this is involved in what Peter says about the basic foundations of sanctification.¹ That is why he begins his letter with such enthusiastic words: 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!'² You can sense his personality bursting through his words and hear him breaking into praise, so amazed and grateful is he for the work of God in his life.

We sometimes fear that the New Testament's teaching on being devoted to God, and on growing in holiness, will place unbearable demands on us. Remember therefore that it is to the apostle Peter we are listening here. Few disciples of the Lord Jesus can have made more of a public mess of their early Christian life than he did. But the very fact that it is *this disciple* writing about holiness ought to reassure us that Christ does not command what he will not provide. There is no need to be permanently disabled by past failure or paralysed by the fear that we are doomed to repeat it.

In summary

Sanctification, then, is God setting us apart for himself. Thus as saints we have already been sanctified by him.³ Then he gradually

¹ Holiness is a basic theme throughout the letter. See 1 Peter 1:15, 16; 2:5, 9; 3:5.

² 1 Peter 1:3.

³ Cf. John Murray, *Collected Writings* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 2, 277-278: 'It is a fact too frequently overlooked that in the New Testament the

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transforms us so that we begin to reflect his attributes and attractiveness. Jesus Christ's life begins to be mirrored in our lives and personalities. The Peter of 'First Peter' is still very obviously the Peter of Caesarea Philippi, and of the Mount of Transfiguration, and of the Garden of Gethsemane, and of the courtyard of the high priest's house, as well as of the dinner tables of Antioch—all scenes of his failure.¹ Yet he is not what he once was. He has grown. Grace has begun to show that it is reigning in his life.²

Here, against that background, the apostle's words to his Christian friends provide them with the foundations on which a life devoted to God can be built and sustained.

Foundation 1: The purpose of God the Trinity

The first foundational principle is this: Our sanctification is the purpose of God the Trinity.

Peter addresses Christians as '*elect* exiles ... in sanctification of the Spirit'.³ He develops this further by explaining that this status of being '*elect*' is rooted in the Father's foreknowledge of them.

God's foreknowledge of us is the love which he set upon us long before we responded to him. He chose us in love. In this sense Peter states that Jesus himself was '*foreknown*'.⁴ Here Peter and Paul are at one in stressing that holiness finds its ultimate source in God's loving election.⁵

Peter does not mean that God chose to save those he knew would want to be saved. For one thing that would make our

most characteristic terms that refer to sanctification are used, not of a process, but of a once-for-all definitive act.⁷

¹ For these moments of failure on Peter's part: Matthew 16:21-23; 17:1-5; 26:30-35, 36-46, 56b; 69-75; Galatians 2:11-14.

² Romans 5:21.

³ 1 Peter 1:1-2.

⁴ Acts 2:23. Cf. 1 Peter 1:20.

⁵ See Ephesians 1:4; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14.

salvation dependent on something in us, when Scripture tells us there is nothing in us that would constrain God's choice. Such a view also operates with an inadequate understanding of sin. We are spiritually bankrupt; we are also God's enemies. There is nothing in us that could qualify us for the loving election of the Father. We are 'by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind'.¹ Neither our good living nor our ability to make good choices causes divine election. They are the result of it. In fact, says Peter, this divine choice had in view the sanctifying work of the Spirit which in turn would lead to our obedience to Jesus Christ. God chose us *in order to* sanctify us.² Divine election is the foundation of sanctification—not the other way round. Everything depends upon God taking the initiative.

Notice the way Peter spells this out. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all involved in transforming us ('elect ... according to the foreknowledge of *God the Father*, in sanctification of *the Spirit*, for obedience to *Jesus Christ*'.³ It is not only that God takes the initiative, but that he specifically does so as *God the Trinity*.

It is staggering to think that these are the words of a Galilean fisherman—even if, as seems likely, he had the ability to run a prosperous family business. Peter has discovered that his Christian experience, beginning in a remote seaside town in Galilee—and indeed every Christian's experience, wherever it begins—has its ultimate origin before the dawn of time in the heart, mind, and heavenly love and purpose of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit!

¹ Ephesians 2:3.

² This of course is the reason why when rightly understood the doctrine of election *never* leads to moral carelessness, although that accusation has often been levelled against it. The logic of election is not: 'I have been chosen for salvation and so I can live any way I please' but 'I have been chosen for salvation and therefore I will live in a way that pleases God'.

³ 1 Peter 1:2.

DEVOTED TO GOD

Once we notice the reference to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit here, it alerts us to the way similar references to their joint activity are frequently to be found in the New Testament.¹

This discovery may astonish us. For today there is a tendency to think that the Trinity is no more than an obscure, almost speculative Christian doctrine, of little practical importance in the Christian life. But see its significance here and we will begin to notice that throughout the New Testament every aspect of our salvation, not least our transformation into the likeness of Christ, is explained in terms of what the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit all do, always in harmony and unity with one another.

The Father, Son and Spirit are always working. Occasionally one person is mentioned, often two, sometimes all three. The New Testament is all about the activity of our Triune Lord. The entire being of God in the fellowship of the Trinity—in what we might think of as an inner-Trinitarian planning meeting—had this great purpose in mind for us: chosen by the Father, we will be saved by the Son, and sanctified by the Spirit. God set his heart on accomplishing all this for us even before the foundation of the world. He chose us; we experience sprinkling by [Jesus'] blood to cleanse our consciences from the guilt of sin. The Holy Spirit comes to sanctify us. The Triune God has devoted himself to bringing about our devotion to him. This is, as it were, priority number two on the divine agenda. It is superseded only by God's over-arching goal of bringing glory to himself and simultaneously giving enjoyment to us.

Priorities

This biblical perspective gives rise to a challenging implication. If sanctification is not my priority then it should not surprise me if I find my Christian life being dogged with frustration. For in this case I am seeking, consciously or not, to withstand the eternal purposes

¹ See Appendix 1.

of God. I am missing out on the central privileges of the Christian life, namely glorifying and enjoying him.¹

So we need to settle the issue of our priorities. If God has committed himself to changing our lives, to sanctifying us, then wisdom—not to mention amazed gratitude—dictates that we should be committed to that too. Otherwise God's will and my will are in competition with each other. But if by God's grace I commit myself to his purposes, Peter's teaching provides me with all the encouragement I need: the whole Trinity co-operates in bringing me to the goal. The Father, the Son and the Spirit co-operate *with one another*, but they also co-operate *with me* in order to make me more like Christ.

We do not know exactly how or when all this became clear to Simon Peter. Slowly but surely he realised the importance of what Jesus had taught him, perhaps especially in his farewell discourse,² and then in the six-week seminar between his resurrection and ascension.³ Now Peter wanted others to know that in the struggle for holiness in an unholy world, God is with us; God is behind us; God is not only at our side but on our side. Whatever opposition there may be from the world, the flesh, and the devil, God the Trinity has determined to pour his energy into making us like Jesus Christ. It is his settled purpose. In this sense T. S. Eliot was right when he wrote that 'Time present and time past are both perhaps present in time future.'⁴ In fact there is no 'perhaps' about it. For God has in the past destined us, and in the present is transforming us, so that in the future we will 'be conformed to the image of his Son'.⁵

¹ As we are reminded by the opening question and answer in the *Shorter Catechism*.

² John 13-17.

³ Acts 1:3.

⁴ The opening lines of 'Burnt Norton' the first of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*.

⁵ Romans 8:29.

Foundation 2: The commandment of God to be holy

Holiness is not only the desire of the Trinity; it is a specific command (and therefore a *commandment*) of God the Father: ‘as he who called you is holy, you also must be holy in all your conduct, since it is written “be holy, for I am holy”’.¹

One of the places where the words ‘Be holy, for I am holy’ appear is in Leviticus 19, a chapter which expounds in some detail the principles of the Ten Commandments recorded in Exodus 20. It is as though God were saying: ‘All of these commandments may be summed up in this single principle: “You are to be holy, because I am holy.”’ In other words, ‘Be like me!’ Later we learn that the fulfilment of the commandments is love for God and for others.² This suggests that holiness and love do not exist a diameter apart from each other (as is sometimes imagined). In fact they have a symbiotic relationship. Sanctification is growing in holy-love; love is growing in holiness.

As with much else, this is a biblical principle that God explained progressively and cumulatively to his people.

The Lord unfolded it at first through liturgical rites and ceremonies prescribed in the law given to and expounded by Moses. Think of these as being like the pop-up picture books we give to and read with small children. They learn not only from words but also from pictures. The appeal is made to their senses: they hear the words; but they can also see and touch what these words express. In the same way the Lord built physical ceremonies and objects into old covenant life, which the people could hear, see, touch, and even smell. They experienced a multi-media expression of their sin and of

¹ 1 Peter 1:15-16. Peter is quoting Leviticus 11:44; 19:2. In this way he indicates that God’s basic desire is the same throughout Scripture, even although there was a distinctively Mosaic ‘shape’ to holiness in the days of the old covenant. Now, after Pentecost, holiness has an ‘internationalizable’ quality and takes its shape from Jesus Christ.

² Deuteronomy 6:5; Luke 10:27.