

Sanctification in Triune God

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Introduction

Sanctification is a noun belonged to the verb “sanctify” which means to make holy. Holiness is the essence of God, and the essence is presented in the acts of Triune God. [\[1\]](#) The three persons of Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit play different roles in sanctification. Their works are mutually related and they are equally important in the works of sanctification; without each, sanctification of believers would not be complete. It is because no one might worship God in holiness without the election from Father, without reconciliation through the blood of Jesus Christ or without the renewal of one’s holy life by Holy Spirit.

[\[2\]](#)

Sanctification is totally God’s work for people. Sanctification has simply three dimensions, i.e. it is made from God, through God and by God.

Sanctification work in God, Father

Father’s work of election or predestination

God, Father is the “author of sanctification” and He initiated the sanctification. [3] In Old Testament, “Holy” in Hebrew literally means “separate” which derives from a verb meaning “to cut off” or “to separate.” In New Testament, “holy” in Greek literally denotes “a chosen people.”

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Erickson stated that “one theme from the biblical insistence on holiness and purity is separation.”

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Thus, the meaning of sanctification or holiness is closely related with “a chosen people” or “God’s calling of a people.”

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Father, God separates or calls those who believe in Him as a group of holy people “to live a holy life.” (1 Thess. 4:7), and Paul urges us to live in a holy life “worthy of the calling” we received. (Eph. 4:1) Also, election is “not merely segregation; rather, election is determination ... to act in a certain way.”

[7]

In other words, we are chosen or elected to be sanctified and the way we live is to testify whether we are elected. Moreover, sanctification is the objective or the result of the election; thus, the idea of sanctification cannot be isolated from the idea of election. As John Calvin said, “God has elected us and that he now calls us to holiness are two things which are joined together and are inseparable. Holiness, purity, and every excellence that is found among men are the fruit of election. Holiness and purity of life flow from the election of God.”

[8]

A command, decree and will of Father

Sanctification is a command or decree of God; for it is written: “be holy, because I am holy.” (1 Peter 1:16) and God said, “I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect.” (Gen 17:1) Sanctification is “the necessity of conformity of God.” [9] God commands us to be sanctified, because “without holiness no one will see the Lord.” (Heb 12:14) Sanctification or holiness is the expectation or requirement of God for us and it expects us to comply with God’s command “from our own ability and power.”

[10]

Not complying with God’s command for holiness would result in penalty or punishment. However, in the new covenant or the gospel, our sins would be pardoned and our acts were accepted, although they come “short of legal perfection.”

[11]

Besides, sanctification is the will of God as Paul said, "It is God's will that you should be sanctified." (1 Thess 4:3) Sanctification is "our conformity and obedience to the will of God."

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Packer also stated that sanctification is to learn "what obedience requires, costs, and involves through the experience of actually doing his Father's will."

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In short, sanctification is our obedience to God's will. Moreover, the command, decree and the will of God were not only something we have to obey or to comply with, but they were "given to us by the kindness of God and destined for our benefit." They are good to us.

Subordinated to the Glory of God

As Calvin stated, sanctification is "subordinated to the glory of God," and it "consists in His authority and righteousness." [\[14\]](#) We should be sanctified in order to glorify God, Father. We must have "the generation of heart" which involves faith and obedience to glorify God.

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In the end of our Christian life, we could demonstrate "divine righteousness" and praise "divine goodness" and God is glorified in us.

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Also, good works are essential in Christian life because they "belong to the glory of God"

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Our good works would glorify God when "we are grateful for His goodness" and we deny ourselves.

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In fact, our Christian life, with the good works, is planting and promoting the glory of God. (Isa. 61:3)

[\[19\]](#)

A Father-child relationship

Sanctification forms a Father-child relationship between God and us. God, Father reconciles us to Himself through Jesus Christ, so that “we serve him as a Father in holiness and righteousness” [20] as Paul told Ephesians that for God “chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ...” (Eph. 1:4-5) Since we are adopted as children of God, God loves us as a father and we have a fellowship with Him. We are no longer fear of God as long as we are holy or sanctified. Holiness is a “relational concept” and it manifests in relation between God and His creation. [21] Moreover, the idea of sanctification cannot be separated from the Father-child relationship because sanctification and adoption occur at the same time. [22]

A response to the grace and righteousness of God

It is God, Father’s grace to call us to be sanctified. Our sanctified life is a response to God’s calling grace. As Calvin said, “it is the human response to the gracious activity of God on life, ... , a living and deeply mutual relationship to the living God which reveals itself in self-denial, cross bearing, and meditation on the future life.” [23] In other words, Father-child relationship and mortification are a response to grace of God. Also, Paul told us that “the grace of God ... teaches us to say “no” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age. (Titus 2:11-12) The grace of God teaches us to become godly or sanctified. Moreover, our hearts are inclined by God to “duties and obedience by strengthening, increasing and exciting the grace we have received.” The grace of God would motivate us to work for God and be obedient to God; thus, the more grace is received from God, the more duties and obedience are required by God.

Sanctification work in God, Son

Son's work of redemption and reconciliation

Jesus Christ was given as redemption and reconciliation. [24] The work of Son, God is to achieve "separation of humankind by rescuing humanity from ... unholiness or threat of sin" and to remake "a holy nation, God's own people." (1 Pet. 2:9)

[25]

And He reconciles or restores our relationship between Father, God by His death on Cross. As Paul said that Jesus Christ "reconciles both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility," (Eph. 2:16) He is the mediation of the reconciliation. Also, Weber asserted that "the work of sanctification, resolved by Father, God, is accomplished in the person and mission of the Son of God, ..., whose blood we have redemption and the forgiveness of our trespasses."

[26]

Sanctification is based on the foundation of forgiveness and reconciliation. The work of God, Son is to "reconcile and present us holy blameless and irreproachable" before Father, God (Col. 1:22)

[27]

Besides, Calvin stated that the "effectual calling" or election of a holy people takes place in Christ." [28] Thus, the believers who are "elected in Christ," secure "the eternal will of God" and they will not perish, but they will be "restored on the final day." [29] It is because the consequence of election involves justification which requires redemption from Christ. It is also because God Father "who elects is the same God who was in Christ." Christ, who is "the register of election, and "source of election" completes "the deeds of salvation." If faith is taken away from the election, election "will be imperfect."

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Similarly, if redemption is taken away from sanctification, sanctification will be incomplete.

Purification or cleansing is the first part of sanctification,

Sanctification is "a gradual process," and the starting point of the process is when we are justified before God. We are justified only in God, Son. [31] We have to be cleansed or purified from all our sin by the blood of Jesus Christ. (1 Jn. 1:7) before we become righteous or justified before God. Justification is the first part of sanctification. We have to believe the cleansing

power of blood of Jesus Christ has this function as John Owen said “Christ is our sanctification through faith in His blood as sprinkled.”

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Besides, the power of blood of Jesus Christ not only cleanses away our sins, but also helps “sick, sinful and polluted humanity,” and “releases us from their contamination.” Thus, we could be holy and blameless before Christ through His blood. “As Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her ... to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.” (Eph. 5:25-27)

Union with God, Son

The concept of union with Christ is “in a sense encompassing the whole of salvation,” [\[33\]](#) and it is “closely related to faith and forgiveness of sin.”

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It is because the salvation or “covenant of grace” brings us “into union with Jesus Christ.”

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In other words, union with Christ is the fruit or result of salvation. As sanctification is the “invariable result of the vital union with Christ” which salvation offers us, sanctification is inseparable from the union with Christ.

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No one could be “really or habitually purified or sanctified” unless he or she is united with Jesus Christ.

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Union

with Christ is caused by God’s love and our obedience as Jesus said, “if anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.” (Jn. 14:23) When someone is united with Christ, he or she can enjoy the communion or fellowship with God. Union

with Christ is “the foundation of all communion, and therefore the necessary prerequisite for fellowship with God.”

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Also, when we are in union with Christ, we “mystically or spiritually become one Christ.”

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Like Jesus told us “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him.” (Jn. 15:5)

Besides, the union with Christ simply consists of two parts: mortification and vivification. Mortification is to die with Jesus Christ and vivification is to resurrect with Jesus Christ. It is similar to Paul’s teaching, “we were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may

live a new life” and “now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.” (Rom. 6:4,8) Sanctification is closely related to mortification and vivification because “holiness is the laying aside of putting to death at the cross of the Son of God; and holiness is the living out alive in the Son’s resurrection” in mortification and vivification respectively.

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Mortification is to terminate a life of “old, death-laden existence of trespasses and sins,” whereas vivification is to live a life “corresponding to the great Easter reality: You he made alive.”

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(Eph.2:1) Calvin inserted that mortification does not mean “the end of selfhood”, but it is “extraction from the realm of wickedness, idolatry and rebellion.”

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Moreover, mortification and vivification are inter-related, because vivification is to direct “all the acts of our life and activity” towards the Lord and mortification is to turn us “from the shadow of sin towards the light of life”

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Owen said that we have no power and strength to “live to God,” until we receive “the benefits of the death of Christ.”

Renovation in the image of God, Son.

Jesus Christ is “the living image of God.” [\[44\]](#) God intends or predestinates every sanctified person to be conformed to the image or likeness of Jesus Christ as Paul said, “the aim of this divine working is likeness to Christ himself. This was God’s intention from all eternity.” (Rom 8:29) Our images become Christ-like or conformed to image of Christ at the end of sanctification. It is a process to restore the “broken image of God” or reintegrate the “disintegrated and disordered personhood” after the man’s fall. The broken image of God is “repaired by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

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In fact, it is a process of “re-creation’ to re-establish the original images corresponding to righteousness of God. Also, the process is an “essence” of sanctification.

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The restoration is effected when we are in “union with Christ”

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; i.e. by the mortification “of the old nature and the vivification of His Spirit.”

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In this way, the image of Christ, including his holiness and grace, becomes our image.

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Thus, the likeness of Christ is not assumed “just an external or superficial resemblance.” It assumes that there is internal renewal of a Christian life.

When the restoration or re-creation process is complete, we are a new creation and have a newness of life. As Paul said, “we then become a creation, the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Cor. 5:17) We put off the old man, which is sinful and ungodly and put on the “new man which is created in true righteousness and holiness.” [\[51\]](#) The new man assumes a “fresh beginning” [\[52\]](#), “new attitude of minds,” and the “perfection of human beings”.

[\[53\]](#)

(Eph. 4:21-23) Also, the new man supposes to do “good works” as Paul told Ephesians, “for we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

The new man or the Christ-like creation should always be “all purified, enhanced, perfected” [\[54\]](#)
[1](#)
and doing good works in daily life in order to glorify God.

Sanctification work in God, Holy Spirit

Holy Spirit's work in realizing and perfecting the sanctification

Sanctification is a “perpetual and inherent lack of self-sufficiency” due to our sinful and secularized nature, sanctification cannot be realized or completed by its own. [\[55\]](#) Holy Spirit is the “agent” [\[5](#)

[6\]](#)

of sanctification to fulfill the incompleteness. In other words, Holy Spirit completes the “work of

making holy.”

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Since there are different degrees in the sanctification process, Holy Spirit carries on the sanctification process “towards perfection” as sanctification.

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Holy Spirit works for Father and Son to make the sanctification work whole and complete.

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For instance, Holy Spirit helps God, Father complete or perfect “that separation by sanctifying humankind and drawing it into righteous fellowship with holy God.”

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Holy Spirit helps God, Son cause all the spiritual purifying, cleansing and union.

Holy Spirit is the cause of all spiritual purifying and cleansing.

Our sins and trespasses were washed away because of death and the blood of Jesus Christ, but act of washing; i.e., “application of death and the blood of Christ” on our souls is performed by Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit is the agent and “principal efficient cause of all spiritual cleansing and purifying” for our first part of sanctification. [\[61\]](#) Paul also told us that “you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” (1Cor. 6:11)

Union with Christ by His Spirit

We are united with Christ by “the secret energy of His Spirit.” [\[62\]](#) Holy Spirit is the agent, and He enables the union between Christ and us. Holy Spirit is “indwelling in us and is communicating from Christ” to cause the union with Christ originally and efficiently”

[\[63\]](#)

Holy Spirit communicates the grace and holiness of Jesus Christ with our souls and our hearts. The work of Holy Spirit is a necessity in the union. Therefore, we have to receive the Holy Spirit in order to make union with Christ effectively.

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Renovation of our life by Holy Spirit in the image of God

Sanctification is the “immediate work of God by his Spirit” upon our nature by transforming us into Christ likeness, so that we become unblamable and holy before God. [\[65\]](#) Our old natures are renovated or renewed by Holy Spirit in the image of God through Jesus Christ.

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The “new creation” or the Christ-like nature is born from the “Spirit of holiness”

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In short, the work of Holy Spirit is to renovate our natures and restore us in the divine image.

Guiding and ruling our life by Holy Spirit

If we are sanctified by Holy Spirit, we are also governed by Holy Spirit. “Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.” (Gal 5:25) Holy Spirit governs and rules our hearts so that we should live and act corresponding to Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit “communicates the great, permanent, positive effect of holiness unto our souls, and guides and assists us all the acts, works, and duties of holiness.” [\[68\]](#) Holy Spirit guides and directs our life and actions according to the will of God by working on our souls, mind, wills and affections.

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Indeed, the guidance of Holy Spirit is to draw us closer to God. Moreover, our sanctified life is not “a static matter” but is a “process of growth and progress,”

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That is, we should always live out more holy and righteous in our daily lives with the help of Holy Spirit. Besides, when our hearts are governed by Holy Spirit, it is ratified that we are elected or chosen by God as a holy people.

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The work of Holy Spirit in guiding and ruling peoples’ hearts is the result for the election work of God, Father in sanctification.

Conclusion

Sanctification works are started and finished by Triune God. The sanctifying works are carried out from God, Father, through God, Son and by God, Holy Spirit. They are all originated from God's love, grace and mercy. Father, as an initiator, performs the election work and chooses us as a holy people. Son, as a mediator, satisfies the reconciliation work, and restores the original relationship between God and us. Holy Spirit, as an agent, completes the sanctification work, and renews our life to become Christ-like. The sanctification works of Father, Son and Holy are mutually related and they are equally significant. Without each person's work, our sanctification would become incomplete or imperfect.

Also, the sanctifying works of Triune God entails our responses; for instances, thankful hearts for the mercy of God, living out a Christ-like life and complying with the guidance or direction of Holy Spirit. Those responses are derived from our love, faith, and obedience to God. Our love, faith and obedience are corresponding to the love, grace and mercy of God.

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[2] John H. Leith, *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), 96.

[3] John Owen, *The Works of John Owen: The Holy Spirit*. Edited by William H. Goold. Carlisle (Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 55.

[4] Weber, *Holiness*, 80.

[5] Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 990.

[6] Weber, *Holiness*, 46.

[7] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 980-81.

[8] Leith, *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 130.

[9] Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 381.

[10] Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 382.

[11] *Ibid.*, 607.

[12] *Ibid.*, 605.

[13] J.I. Packer, *A Passion for Holiness*. Nottingham(G. B.: Crossway Books, 1992),15.

[14] Leith, *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 38-39.

[15] *Ibid.*,45.

[16] *Ibid.*, 37.

[17] *Ibid.*, 105.

[18] *Ibid.*, 42.

[19] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 783.

[20] Leith, *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 100.

[21] Weber, *Holiness*, 44.

[22] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 974.

[23] Leith, *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 38.

[24] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 784.

[25] Weber, *Holiness*, 48,52.

[26] *Ibid.*, 80.

[27] *Ibid.*, 52

[28] Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 33.

[29] Leith, *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 123.

[30] *Ibid.*, 131.

[31] *Ibid.*, 96.

[32] Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 444.

[33] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 987.

[34] Leith, *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 98.

[35] Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, 32.

[36] John Charles Ryle, *Aspect of Holiness* (London: Grace Publications, 1999), 20-21

[37] Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 517.

[38] Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, 34.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Weber, *Holiness*, 88.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid., 91.

[43] Ibid., 91-92.

[44] Leith, *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 72.

[45] Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 469.

[46] Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, 65.

[47] Packer, *A Passion for Holiness*, 93.

[48] Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, 66.

[49] Leith, *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 74.

[50] Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, 33.

[51] Packer, *A Passion for Holiness*, 36.

[52] Adolf Koberle, *The Quest for Holiness*. Translated by John C. Mattes (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982), 156.

[53] Leith, *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 71.

[54] Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 375.

[55] Weber, *Holiness*, 83.

[56] Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, 55.

[57] Weber, *Holiness*, 52.

[58] Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 397.

[59] Ibid., 369.

[60] Weber, *Holiness*, 48.

[61] Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 423.

[62] Leith, *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 99.

[63] Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 478.

[64] Ibid., 517.

[65] Ibid., 369.

[66] Ibid., 386-87.

[67] Ibid., 465

[68] Ibid., 468

[69] Ibid., 469

[70] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 987. Erickson, 995.

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