

Thoughts on the Sanctification Process

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Sanctification is both a person (I Corinthians 1:30) and a process of life-long practices and commitments leading us to experience God's intended purpose: that we become like Jesus (Rom. 8:29). It is in full surrender to the same Holy Spirit who indwelt the earthly Jesus and who now indwells the believer (Eph. 1:19, 20) that we practice various spiritual disciplines as methods for Him to transform our mind, emotions, character and heart that we might inwardly be and outwardly exhibit to those around us the reality of God in a human life.

I see sanctification as a continuation of God's ultimate intention for man.

God reveals Himself in both the Old Testament (Jer. 1:2; Hos. 11:1) and the New Testament (Eph. 1:5) as a father. And like a father, His desire is for many more children who would be like His Son Jesus. God already has created beings (angels) to do what He needed or wanted. It was sons and daughters – children – that He wanted who of their own volition would love Him and desire to please Him.

The Fall interrupted that process. However, God had already planned and provided for an answer before the Fall – Jesus (I Pet. 1:18-21; Rev. 13:8) “foreordained before the foundation of the world”, whom God chose “to fulfil this part before the world was founded” (J.B. Phillips). That answer was revealed in the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

The earthly life of Jesus did two things:

(1) It provided the final means (superseding the animal sacrificial system) by which God, who is rightfully angry and offended by man's sin, could be propitiated. Atonement could be made for man's sin, man could be justified and consequently declared righteous, and could now be made a new, clean and holy (set apart for a specific purpose) vessel in which God's Holy Spirit could come to dwell and thereby make mankind what God intended them to be from the beginning.

(2) Jesus' incarnation also gave a real-life example of what we were intended to be and how we are to live and interact in a fallen world. Jesus came to earth (Phil. 2:7) and voluntarily “gave up His divine privileges” (New Living Bible), “emptied Himself” (NT 2758 – making void His equality with or the form of God) and was born “in the likeness of man” (likeness in image but not an exact copy). He came as the second Adam (I Cor. 15:22; 45-47) – a man standing in as the representative head for all of mankind who was free from sin with the ability to choose. He assumed life as a human just as I should live it.

Whereas Jesus emptied Himself, God filled Him with the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit came upon Jesus in fullness at His baptism by John. Prior to this event it had been revealed to John that the Holy Spirit would descend and remain on one of the men whom he would baptize (John 1:33). This man would be the Christ, the Messiah – God in human flesh and blood. Matthew records (3:16) that at Jesus’ baptism the Holy Spirit visibly represented as a dove to those in attendance did just that:

- descended – come down from a higher place
- alighted – to come,
 - to remain (John 1:33);
 - the dove appeared “As a visible token of a new degree of the Holy Ghost’s operation in Christ” (Benson)

Isaiah 42:1 prophesied that God would put His Spirit upon His Servant and in the waters on the west bank of the Jordan River that time had come and that event had taken place.

Now “full of the Holy Spirit” (Luke 4:1) Jesus begins a forty day fast in the wilderness. The word “full” is an adjective meaning “filled up as opposed to empty; complete, lacking nothing.” Paul uses a cognate verb form of the same word in Eph. 5:18 when he writes that I am to also be “filled with the Holy Spirit.” The root word (NT 4130) for both these words means: fill to the maximum (full extent); it expresses totality and implies full quantity (“up to the max”).

Paul writes in Eph. 1:20 that this same Holy Spirit who came in fullness upon Jesus also raised His dead corpse back to life. And, now this same Holy Spirit indwells every true believer the with the “greatness of His power” (1:19).

‘According to the working of the strength of the might which He wrought in Christ’-the Resurrection, the Ascension, the session at the right hand of God, the rule over all creatures, and the exaltation above all things on earth or in the heavens-these are the facts which the Apostle brings before us as the pattern-works, the chefs-d’oeuvre of the power that is operating in all Christians. The present glories of the ascended Christ are glories possessed by a Man, and, that being so, they are available as evidences and measures of the power which works in believing souls. In them we see the possibilities of humanity, the ideal for man which God had when He created and breathed His blessing upon him. It is one of ourselves who has strength enough to bear the burden of the glory, one of ourselves who can stand within the blaze of encircling and indwelling Divinity and be unconsumed. The possibilities of human nature are manifest there. If we want to know what the Divine Power can make of us, let us turn to look with the eye of faith upon what it has made of Jesus Christ. (MacLaren’s Expositions, Ephesians 1:19)

In Jesus' last major recorded address to His disciples (John 14-16), He announces His permanent departure from them. In doing so, He explained that the same Holy Spirit who had worked through Him would come to indwell and work through them (14:12). He reminded them that this was not as foreign to them as it sounded. They were already familiar with the Holy Spirit and had witnessed His operation in Jesus's life for the past three years that they'd been with Him (14:17).

Jesus had lived a human life before them for three years as a man full of the Holy Spirit and now it would be their blessing to be able to do the same.

Towards the end of Jesus' forty days on earth following His resurrection, He told His followers to wait in Jerusalem and after His ascension He would send the "promise of the Father". This was not a new concept. It had been spoken of by Old Testament prophets including Ezekiel (36:25-27) and Joel (2:28). God had promised that a day was coming when He would put His Spirit in the hearts of all who believed in Him. At last, the living reality of God in the man was going to be for all people – not just a chosen few.

*But it is from Him that you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us
wisdom from God [revealing His plan of salvation], and
righteousness [making us acceptable to God], and
sanctification [making us holy and setting us apart for God], and
redemption [providing our ransom from the penalty for sin]
– I Corinthians 1:30 (AMPC)*