

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND SANCTIFICATION

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Abstract: *Questions about the role of the Holy Spirit in the Christian experience frequently take the form of questions about the role of the Spirit in sanctification, propelled by the assumption that sanctification refers to the work of God's grace that carries the Christian forward throughout life toward final glorification. Much confusion and controversy surrounding the Spirit's role in sanctification derives more specifically from the assumption that sanctification is virtually synonymous with transformation, frequently exhibited in the tendency to read sanctification into transformation texts where sanctification is not discussed. This tendency misdirects the question about the Spirit's role in sanctification. The biblical portrait treats sanctification as the divine act that places the Christian in a specific relationship to God's presence in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit, a relationship that provides for and nourishes transformation in the ongoing Christian experience, in whatever way that transformation is experienced and interpreted phenomenologically.*

Though not known for giving primary or overt attention to the subject of the lived Christian experience, T. F. Torrance's theological work reflected a steady undercurrent of concern for how the understanding of God and God's ways with humanity affects the lived Christian experience. Torrance was deeply troubled by

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the deleterious effects of theological misconstruals on the lives of God's people.¹ He had much to say both about the Holy Spirit and about sanctification, though not perhaps addressing those theological loci or the linkage between them in ways characteristic of much popular writing on the Christian life. His thoughts on the matter (and perhaps he) will look over our shoulders as we seek insight on the Spirit's role in sanctification, sanctification being the doctrinal locus most often associated with the ongoing Christian experience and understood to be theologically subsequent to justification and experientially subsequent to conversion.

The question of the Holy Spirit's role in sanctification provides a diagnostic lens through which to view disagreements and confusion about the lived Christian experience — understood in terms of the pursuit of and growth in Christlikeness or holiness — that have long distinguished Christian traditions and beleaguered or confused Christians within those traditions. Those disagreements and confusions betray assumptions about sanctification that will be examined and challenged in due course, e.g., that human experiential phenomena constitute an appropriately central focal point as well as criteria for understanding both sanctification and the Holy Spirit's role in it. Admittedly, the Christian life is a life of active relationship that encompasses the range of phenomena associated with sentient agency. Yet a responsible engagement with the question of the Holy Spirit's role in sanctification must begin further upstream by identifying the proper theological starting point(s) and tracing out the line of questioning from there. First, however, we must review some assumptions that typically frame and animate much conversation about the Holy Spirit's role in sanctification. Then we will examine some key biblical texts to orient the discussion. Along the way we will draw increasingly upon T. F. Torrance's thought to illuminate a path through some of the disagreement.

¹ One example of this concern was Torrance's frequent attention to how christological missteps regarding the hypostatic union of divine and human natures in one person lead to moralistic, burdensome, and anxious worship of God for having ignored or bypassed the divine grace which makes full salvation possible only because the Son of God bound himself in his divinity fully to our humanity. See *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays Towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), ch. 4.

Contested Assumptions

Disagreements and confusion about the lived Christian experience, especially as related to the Holy Spirit's role in sanctification, often emerge from three assumptions that tend to build on each other in sequence. First, sanctification is frequently assumed to be at least roughly synonymous with what the New Testament writers refer to as "transformation," i.e., that sanctification is primarily a character or maturity concept that refers to a believer's level or degree of conformity to the image of Christ. This assumption is expressed in notions such as "progressive sanctification" or "entire sanctification" or "sanctification by faith." In each instance the question of the Holy Spirit's role in sanctification is essentially a question about the Spirit's role in the believer's ongoing experience of conformity to the image of Christ. Second, the Holy Spirit's role in sanctification — a linkage easy to demonstrate from the New Testament — not only serves but is essential to that work of transformation or character development.² Third, personal progress in transformation toward Christlikeness depends upon proper relationship to or engagement with the Holy Spirit for that process. That proper relationship would include correct understanding and expectations of how one's personal effort and intentionality relate to the Spirit's work for the transformation to occur, the nature or type of experiential outcomes to expect from the process, and recognition or assessment of the transformation process.

The third of those assumptions frequently constitutes the point of departure or fragmentation among traditions.³ Perspectives range from passive to active in terms of how Christians are to relate to or depend upon the Holy Spirit for their sanctification. More passive approaches, such as found in "Keswick" spirituality, tend toward a more monergistic emphasis on conscious reliance on the Spirit to do the entire work of personal transformation. More active approaches, such as found

² I address and challenge these assumptions in *Already Sanctified: A Theology of the Christian Life in Light of God's Completed Work* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020).

³ This is amply demonstrated by how the subject of sanctification is treated in works that provide multiple views on the subject with each representative responding to the others. See Donald L. Alexander, ed., *Christian Spirituality: Five Views on Sanctification* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988) and Stanley N. Gundry, ed., *Five Views on Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987).

in Reformed spirituality, tend toward a more synergistic emphasis on the Christian's responsibility for disciplined pursuit of transformation while assuming the Holy Spirit's initiation, animation, and guidance of the process from behind the scenes.⁴

More passive approaches tend to insist that if sanctification (transformation) is the work of the Holy Spirit, it occurs as a result of faith in the Holy Spirit to do that work (Acts 26:18; 2 Thessalonians 2:13). Sanctification is understood to come by faith monergistically in the same sense that justification is by faith and for the same reason; it is an act of God that only God can accomplish. Accordingly, it is assumed that conscious, intentional striving for transformation equates to an attempt to do what only God can do, inevitably resulting in frustration and failure to grow in the freedom and Christlikeness that only God can provide by grace through faith in the Holy Spirit to do the work. More active or synergistic approaches appeal to biblical texts that call believers to intentional, vigorous obedience (Philippians 2:12; 2 Peter 1:5-8), with the vicissitudes of the process being undergirded by and the outcomes of the process secured by the Holy Spirit. This comparison does not ignore the variations of emphasis found between these two poles in other theological traditions but serves only to illustrate how the role of the Holy Spirit in sanctification is not uniformly understood and how different understandings of that role have consequences for daily Christian experience.⁵

So, what needs clarification about the Holy Spirit's role in sanctification? If there is a theological impasse between sanctification traditions, what is the nature of that impasse? We can only gain clarity on the Spirit's role in sanctification if we are clear about the nature of sanctification. The resulting theological focal point that

⁴ J.I. Packer, speaking from a Reformed perspective and criticizing Keswick spirituality, offers this analysis in "Keswick' and the Reformed Doctrine of Sanctification," *Evangelical Quarterly* 27 (1955), 153-67. Steven Barabas offered an exposition and apologetic for Keswick spirituality in *So Great Salvation: The History and Message of the Keswick Convention* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1952).

⁵ The comparative stories of J.I. Packer and Hannah Whitall Smith provide curious anecdotal evidence of how both monergistic and synergistic approaches can be experienced in opposite ways by different individuals. See Hannah Whitall Smith, *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life* (Chicago: Revell, 1883) and Alister McGrath, *To Know and Serve God: A Biography of J I Packer* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997).

emerges better illuminates subsidiary theological questions related to Christian experience.⁶ David Powlison summarizes those questions well.

How do we explain the dynamics of sanctification? How do forgiven sinners change? How do newborn saints learn to trust and love? What is the connecting link between what we say we believe and how we live? ... [H]ow do [people] actually change? Where do they get stuck? What does change — and doesn't change? What is the process like? What are the typical ups and downs? How do you explain the advances and the regressions? ... What is the dynamic by which receiving grace becomes giving grace?⁷

Questions such as these understandably befuddle and beleaguer serious Christians in their own journeys and as they seek pastorally to nurture Christian maturity in others. Proper as these questions are, they can only be properly and fruitfully engaged from theological starting points about the Holy Spirit's role in sanctification that have not always been adequately clarified.

A key argument in this essay will be that confusion amongst theological traditions about the nature of the Holy Spirit's role in sanctification results when questionable assumptions about the nature of sanctification serve as the starting point for the conversation. At this point the assumptions mentioned above come back into view because each in some way links the Holy Spirit's role to the Christian's experience of transformation.

What Is Sanctification Through the Spirit?

Some theological backtracking is in order. A survey of theological treatments of sanctification reveals that sanctification/holiness language has come to be used routinely to denote and interpret biblical texts that speak of transformation.⁸ It

⁶ I am intentionally drawing upon Michael Polanyi's epistemological paradigm of focal and subsidiary awareness to illustrate this point. See Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 55-57.

⁷ David Powlison, *How Does Sanctification Work?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 27-28.

⁸ Payne, *Already Sanctified*, 7.

must be noted, however, that the words “sanctification” (or, generally “consecration” in the Old Testament) and “holiness” — all derived from the *qadosh* and *hagios* word groups — do not generally refer to a growth process but to a decisive act of God that has already been accomplished and that both initiates and animates transformation. Far more is implied by this decisive act than is typically conveyed by the familiar notion of “positional” or even “definitive” sanctification.⁹

If we accept the premise that the New Testament’s call to transformation, i.e., progressive growth in grace toward conformity to the image of Christ, is somehow related to sanctification (I would argue that it is dependent on sanctification) but not simply synonymous with sanctification, resisting the tendency to read sanctification (and thus, the Holy Spirit’s role) too quickly into transformation texts, then we are freed to reexamine afresh the texts that actually speak of the Holy Spirit’s role in sanctification. The picture that emerges may unsettle some long-held presuppositions about sanctification but it also may provide a more expansive vision of the Holy Spirit’s work and as a result breathe some fresh air into the Christian experience, regardless of the theological tradition that has shaped our thinking about the lived Christian experience with the Holy Spirit.

Textual Anchor Points – Old Testament

A brief overview of a few salient texts will mark a trajectory on which consecration is consistently a preparation for God’s presence and God’s purposes. When Moses has his life-altering encounter with God at the burning bush (Exodus 3), God declares the place where he was standing as “holy” — not Moses himself but the space he occupied in God’s immediate presence. In Exodus 19 God instructs Moses to consecrate the people of Israel before they come to meet with God the following day. They could not survive such proximity to the divine presence in an unconsecrated or unholy state. The tabernacle and later the temple were those designated physical spaces — holy places — where God’s presence was particularly manifest for the sake of dealing with the people of Israel through the priests. Bernie A. Van De Walle highlights the divine presence as the defining factor in the holiness of the temple.

⁹ Ibid., 41-71. See also David Peterson, *Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

That which made the temple holy — indeed that which made the temple *the temple* — was nothing other than the presence of the Spirit of God. Apart from the Spirit's presence, it was just a building.... Since "temple" refers not to a building but to a place (any place) where the Spirit of God resides, the church can be truly called "the temple."¹⁰

The claim that God's presence made a space holy is not novel. Yet, that defining feature of holiness, consecration, and sanctification seems to have been underdeveloped as theologies of sanctification have evolved over the history of the Church. As Kyle Strobel remarks, "Few doctrines have floated free from their biblical mooring as completely as the doctrine of sanctification."¹¹

Early in Israel's history a consistent connection is evident between consecration and anointing. This occurred with those appointed as priests and with the inanimate objects, such as their garments, used in the Lord's service (Exodus 28:41; 29:21; Leviticus 8:10-12; Numbers 7:1). The theological connection between consecration and anointing takes more explicit shape throughout canonical development as the Spirit is later seen as the agent of anointing for service (1 Samuel 16:13; Isaiah 61:1; Luke 4:18; Acts 10:38). The Spirit's work of consecration and anointing prepares people and even objects for God's presence and God's service. While consecration has clear moral and ethical implications, it does not as such alter the properties or character of its objects, whether human or inanimate.

Textual Anchor Points – New Testament

In 1 Corinthians 6:11 Paul identifies the Spirit as the divine agent who has washed, justified, and sanctified believers. Here the Holy Spirit's work in sanctification is portrayed in the same accomplished sense as washing (cleansing from sin) and justification. All three works of the Spirit make the believer new before God with the clear implications (in the overall context) of newness in relation

¹⁰ Bernie A. Van De Walle, *Rethinking Holiness: A Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 139.

¹¹ Kyle Strobel, endorsement, *Already Sanctified*, back cover.

to each other. What the Holy Spirit does in sanctification provides for and obliges the believer to live into a different way of life.

2 Corinthians 3:17-18 offers a somewhat more complex picture. Close examination reveals a theological picture in continuity with the pattern of the Spirit's role in sanctification that began in the Old Testament. Paul states,

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.¹²

Paul identifies two results from the Spirit's work: freedom and transformation into Christ's image with ever-increasing glory. Though he does not explicitly mention sanctification in this text, the assumption that sanctification is synonymous with transformation prompts some to draw upon this text to support the notion of progressive sanctification. Yet, the Spirit's work in giving this freedom actually reflects what sanctification accomplishes through the ongoing work of the Spirit.

The context leading up to this text speaks of Moses's veil that protected people from the immediacy of God's glory and that had obscured the true significance of what God had revealed. That veil is removed when we turn to the Lord. We are now free through the Spirit to stand in the immediate presence of God; to "see" God in a sense that God's people could not do prior to Christ's completed work and the pouring out of the Spirit. We are free to "see" God in this way because we see God through Jesus, and that by the Spirit. In view here is the work that the Spirit does in sanctification to prepare us to be in God's presence, which then with the removal of the veil allows God's glory to transform us. The primary focus of the Holy Spirit's work is to bring us into the immediate, interactive presence of God by placing us in Christ. As a result, the Spirit effects our transformation through being in God's presence.

¹² All Scripture citations are from the New Revised Standard Version, updated edition (National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 2022).

Paul states in 2 Thessalonians 2:13, "But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth." Here the Spirit's sanctifying work is clearly and directly instrumental in salvation, including God's act of choosing. Sanctification through the Spirit is an act related to our beginnings in Christ. Paul's statement here fits nicely with the familiar theological category of "positional" sanctification, which often provides a theological placeholder to acknowledge texts that associate sanctification with salvation without having to follow the tendency of late medieval Roman Catholicism to fold sanctification into justification in a way that makes justification dependent on becoming morally worthy of justifying grace. Unfortunately, the only soteriological significance attributed to sanctification in many Protestant theologies is through the category of "positional" sanctification, which has typically been treated as secondary to sanctification as progressive or something yet to be fully realized in the believer's experience. With recognition that the Spirit is the agent of sanctification, the Spirit's agency is then seen primarily in transformation; hence, the ongoing controversy and confusion over the Spirit's role in sanctification.

The Apostle Peter places sanctification in similar soteriological light in 1 Peter 1:1-2, "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To the exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood." Here, as in 2 Thessalonians 2:13, the Spirit's sanctifying work is connected to salvation, though somewhat more directly and clearly in relationship to God's choosing. Peter's reference to "sprinkled with his blood" clearly aligns with the Old Testament (e.g., Leviticus 16:19; Joshua 7:13) and the book of Hebrews (e.g., 9:13; 10:2-10) in connecting consecration/sanctification with cleansing.

In Titus 3:5 Paul highlights renewal as a work of the Spirit and brings that together with the theme of washing — a work he relates to the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 6:11. Though he does not use the language of sanctification here, renewal is commonly seen as a reference to progressive sanctification;

sanctification depicting the process of growth in Christlikeness.¹³ Whether this establishes the Spirit as the agent of transformation depends on whether renewal refers to the believer's ongoing growth. In John 3 Jesus restricts regeneration to birth (*gennethe*) by the Spirit. In Colossians 3:10 Paul speaks of renewal (*anakainoumenon*) in the sense of ongoing growth into the image of Christ. Yet, one must assume that this renewal and transformation are synonymous with or explanatory of sanctification in order to equate the Spirit's role in sanctification with the process and experience of conformity of the believer to the image of Christ.

This survey obviously does not address some familiar texts often understood as depicting sanctification as a process (e.g., Romans 6:19) or as a reality yet to be realized in the Christian experience (1 Thessalonians 5:23; Hebrews 12:14; 1 Peter 1:14-16). Without ignoring the important themes that complete the overall biblical profile of sanctification from these texts, it must be emphasized that the overwhelming majority of biblical uses of sanctification/holiness language speak of an accomplished reality that the biblical writers routinely appeal to as the basis for the more imperatival and future dimensions.¹⁴

Theological Implications

This brief overview displays a pattern in which sanctification is first and definitively a work of God. Michael Allen remarks that "all creaturely holiness is communicated holiness in the same way that creaturely life is communicated life."¹⁵ All experiential aspects or implications of sanctification are derivative from and responsive to God's work in sanctification. Furthermore, the divine act of sanctifying occurs through the

¹³ Anthony Hoekema, "The Reformed Perspective," in *Five Views on Sanctification*, 67.

¹⁴ It should also be noted that conventional interpretations of these texts should not be taken for granted. On Romans 6:19 see Victor Paul Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 156-57, 196. On 1 Thessalonians 5:23 see Nijay K. Gupta, *1-2 Thessalonians* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016), 114-15. On Hebrews 12:14 see Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 367. On 1 Peter 1:14-16 see John H. Elliott, *1 Peter: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 362.

¹⁵ Michael Allen, *Sanctification*, *New Studies in Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 87.

agency of the Holy Spirit as integral to salvation and is not merely subsequent to salvation in a developmental sense. Ivor J. Davidson observes,

[T]he theology of sanctification will inevitably go astray if it begins anywhere other than with the comprehensiveness of the gospel's announcement as we encounter it from the first: in Christ by the Spirit. If sanctification seems an oppressive theme, always existing in some degree of tension with the message of justification, forever threatening to cramp our Christian freedom, spoil our present joy and challenge our future hope — if it is a matter only of plodding asceticism, a perpetual struggle for spiritual brownie points, a technology of ascent whose benefits continually elude our grasp — it may well be that we have commenced our thinking in the wrong place; with human saintliness rather than with the God who makes saints, and with our own ideas about spiritual eminence rather than with sanctity as defined in God's prevenient movement toward us.¹⁶

The claim that sanctification is a divine act does not deny or dismiss the importance of human response, human experience, or growth processes. Rather, it places the human experiential phenomena — cognitive subjectivities such as desire and intentionality — in proper relationship to the divine act, insisting that those phenomena be understood in light of the nature of the divine act.

Sanctification as a Trinitarian Act

As a divine act sanctification is specifically a Trinitarian act which follows specific christological contours by means of the Holy Spirit. T. A. Noble rightly points us to the Holy Spirit's role in Jesus' sanctification, from his conception by the Spirit as he entered and sanctified humanity on our behalf to his obedience to the Father throughout his life and even unto death. "[H]is obedience was *in the power of the sanctifying Spirit*. So as a human being ... it is *in the power of the Spirit* that he goes obediently to the cross to perfect his self-sacrifice, his offering of himself to

¹⁶ Ivor J. Davidson, "Gospel Holiness," in *Sanctification: Explorations in Theology and Practice*, ed. Kelly Kopic (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 193.

the Father in love and obedience."¹⁷ Such a trinitarian starting point calibrates the trajectory, the character, and the proportions of all further considerations of sanctification. The Spirit's role in sanctification is oriented toward the Son with reference to the Father. All of the Spirit's transformative acts in human persons, including those associated with sanctification, are defined by what the Spirit did with respect to Jesus in his ministry to the Father on our behalf.

As the Sanctified One, Jesus worked out his saving obedience in the power of the Spirit in his atonement for sin. Torrance notes,

In him the Holy Son of God was grafted on to the stock of our fallen human existence, and in him our mortal and corrupt human nature was assumed into union with the Holy Son of God, so that in Jesus, in his birth and sinless life, in his death and resurrection, there took place a holy and awful judgment on our flesh of sin, and an atoning sanctification of our unholy human existence. It was only through such atonement that God in all his Godness and holiness came to dwell in the midst of mortal, sinful man.¹⁸

Torrance's connection between sanctification and atonement mirrors the Levitical motifs of consecration as cleansing for the sake of being in God's presence.

Sanctification as a Christo-Pneumatological Act

The christological orientation of the Spirit's sanctifying work takes shape in us further as we are adopted in Christ and united with Christ. The implications of 1 Corinthians 1:30 take on vast proportions in this regard. "In contrast, God is why you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption." Paul's affirmation, along with Jesus' prayer for

¹⁷ T. A. Noble, *Holy Trinity, Holy People: The Historic Doctrine of Christian Perfecting* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 184, 186 (emphases Noble's). Noble, like T. F. Torrance, follows the Cappadocian argument that Christ entered fallen human nature in order to sanctify it on our behalf. Torrance states, "[T]he assumption of our corrupted nature is at the same time a healing, sanctifying and renewing of it in Christ, so that the very nature through which the advance (*προχώρησις*) of sin took place might be the nature through which righteousness is exhibited." See *Theology in Reconciliation*, 149.

¹⁸ Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1996), 241.

his disciples' sanctification and statement about his self-sanctification for the sake of their sanctification in John 17:17-19, seem rarely to play the pivotal role in experiential questions about sanctification and the disagreements about how to answer them. Yet, they provide a keyhole through which to view the divine act of sanctification *in Christ* that then sheds light on those experiential questions.

To be adopted into Christ, united with Christ, sanctified in Christ — to have Christ as one's holiness — is not merely a "positional" status but a reality brought about by the life-giving Spirit, who is anything but passive in our lives.¹⁹ Sanctification by the Spirit places us in the presence of the living God through Jesus Christ and thereby sweeps us up into God's grand purposes (John 15:1-8). The biblical narrative is punctuated with vignettes of those whose lives undergo profound personal transformation and are put into service by being brought into the presence of the living God, e.g., Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar (Genesis 15-18), Moses (Exodus 3), Isaiah (Isaiah 6), and Saul (Acts 9). Scripture offers a variety of exhortations, descriptions, and images for that transformation process²⁰ but never fully explains the inner mechanics — the "how" — of that process, which is the question of intense concern behind varying theological approaches to the Spirit's role in sanctification outlined in the beginning of this essay. Far more clear and significant is the Spirit's sanctifying role in bringing us into Christ, i.e., into the transforming presence of the living God.

God's presence does indeed launch and continue a profound transformation process, though focusing on the experiential nature of the process tends to mistake, in Polanyi's terms, subsidiary awareness for focal awareness and thus either obscure or distort what is subsidiary that can only be seen properly when viewing the deeper image.²¹ John Webster provides a christological corrective so as

¹⁹ I argue elsewhere that the language of "positional" sanctification can too easily convey formal, static connotations that overlook the pneumatological dynamic involved, which dynamic is both requisite and intrinsically animating for transformation into Christlikeness. See Payne, *Already Sanctified*, 7-8.

²⁰ For example, 2 Peter 1:5-9 highlights intentional effort in response to God's promise, power, glory, goodness, and cleansing. 2 Corinthians 1:5-9 points to the transformative role of suffering. 2 Corinthians 3:17-18 suggests that something about residing in God's presence and seeing God in truth has a transformative effect.

²¹ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 97-99.

to show how subsidiary (though still important) concerns such as transformation and the subjective aspects of personal agency cannot stand as the primary focal points of the Holy Spirit's role in sanctification.

By the personal operation of the Spirit, that which God wills and accomplishes with sovereign freedom and effectiveness comes to be the actual condition of the Christian's existence: no longer an abstract state of affairs but an objective reality which gathers the Christian into itself. 'In' the Spirit, elected and accomplished sanctification is made effectual as the Christian's own most personal reality.²²

'Sanctification in the Spirit' means: it is not I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And 'Christ lives in me' means: by the Spirit's power I am separated from my self-caused self-destruction, and given a new holy self, enclosed by, and wholly referred to, the new Adam in whom I am and in whom I act.²³

Outside the parameters of what sanctification means "in Christ" those subsidiary concerns inevitably expand to weight and proportions that they have not the foundation to bear without distortion.

Webster's contention implies that the appropriate orienting question about the Spirit's role in sanctification is not about the psychological "mechanics" of the interface between personal effort and the Spirit's work in transformation (which leaves us endlessly squabbling about synergism v. monergism). The proper starting point rather is the holiness of Christ which the Spirit increasingly draws us into and makes real in our lives, i.e., integrates with our subjectivity (our values, decisions, commitments, habits, etc.), by prompting our efforts (e.g. practices, disciplines), encouraging and reinforcing them, bringing fruit from them, and thus bringing Christ's full humanness *coram Deo* into our humanness *coram Deo*, experientially realizing our personal identity in and through his identity without displacing our

²² John Webster, *Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 83. Readers of Torrance will recognize Webster's reference to one of Torrance's favorite texts, Galatians 2:20, to which Torrance vigorously and repeatedly appeals in contending for the work that Christ does for us vicariously.

²³ *Ibid.*, 84.

identity. This Christo-centric orientation of the Spirit's role in sanctification helps differentiate genuinely Christian formation from the broader, though significant, realm of human growth, development, and change that are easily and problematically mistaken for sanctification.

The Christo-centric orientation of sanctification is a theme to which Torrance gives recurring attention and elaboration, poignantly bringing together the soteriological aspects that have often been theologically separated from sanctification. Yet in bringing these elements together Torrance illuminates the dynamic and animating character of sanctification through the Spirit for the Christian experience.

From beginning to end it is through the *holiness* of Jesus that we are redeemed and regenerated. Therefore when the Holy Spirit comes to us as the Agent of our renewal he comes not only as the Holy Spirit of the one eternal God but as the Spirit mediated through Christ Jesus and charged with his divine-human holiness. He renews us by drawing us within the self-consecration of Christ made on our behalf and by assimilating us into his holiness. The Holy Spirit renews only through sanctification. If Jesus himself was raised from the dead according to the Spirit of Holiness, it cannot be otherwise with us. It cannot be otherwise with our worship: renewal may come only through holiness, regeneration only through sanctification.²⁴

Since the Spirit's work is tied to Christ, the Spirit is obviously involved in our sanctification inasmuch as Jesus is our sanctification — 1 Corinthians 1:2, 30. Such Christo-centric sanctification, for Torrance, brings sanctification through the Spirit into closer alignment with the overall saving act of God, contra multiple currents within Protestant theologies that have insisted on discrete soteriological categories in which sanctification is the experience of transformation in Christlike character, theologically and chronologically subsequent to God's saving work in atonement and justification.

²⁴ Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 250-51.

Sanctification Through the Spirit as a Soteriological Act

When Torrance reins the sanctification conversation back into soteriology christologically and through the Spirit, he challenges the move within second generation Reformed theology to correct a problem within late medieval Roman Catholicism with a theological solution that simply created a different problem, i.e., the problem of improperly associating sanctification with the process of Christian growth and living, and thus asking the wrong set of questions about the Holy Spirit's role in that process.

That aspect of justification tended to drop out of sight when Protestant scholastic theology began to operate with an *ordo salutis* in which it assigned justification and sanctification to successive and different stages in a process of salvation. In the New Testament itself, however, sanctification or consecration in Christ (for the two words express the same thing) is spoken of in the perfect tense. Christ has already consecrated or sanctified himself for our sakes, so that we are already consecrated or sanctified in him — therefore sanctification or consecration is imputed to us by his free grace just like justification. But it would be a mistake to think of these as two different things, for in the Johannine literature and in the Epistle to the Hebrews the words "sanctification" and "consecration" correspond closely to the Pauline "justification" — they have their special nuance, without doubt, for they are more closely associated than "justification" with the priestly work of Christ, but it is the same reality, the same verity, to use Knox's term, which they describe.²⁵

He goes on in this passage to claim, via Knox, that "justification, regeneration, sanctification flow out of *adoption*."²⁶ This, of course, depends on the more comprehensive understanding of Jesus' sanctification that Torrance articulates, drawing on Gregory of Nazanzus, in which Jesus entered the entirety

²⁵ Ibid., 157-58.

²⁶ Ibid., 158.

of the human experience — including fallen nature — in order to redeem it fully.²⁷ Such full assumption of the humanness that he set out to redeem serves as a crucial backdrop for his sanctification of himself for our sake, as he stated in John 17.

Torrance vividly pulls together these threads of pneumatology, Christology, sanctification, and redemption.

The Holy Spirit comes to us only through him as the Spirit of Holiness, the Spirit of Redemption, and the Spirit of Glory. He comes to us from the inner life of Jesus as the Spirit in which he gained the victory over sin and temptation, as the Spirit in which he gained the victory over sin and temptation, as the Spirit in which he brought the divine holiness to bear upon our flesh of sin, sanctifying and perfecting in himself the very nature which he took from us, and therefore he comes in all the richness of the divine human holiness of Christ. He comes to us from the triumphant obedience and victory of Christ in his Cross and Resurrection, as the Spirit clothed with mighty, redemptive acts transmitting the energy of Christ's risen and glorified Humanity, and as the Spirit of him who has entered into the new life and inherited all the promises of God, and therefore he comes in all the transforming power of the Saviour and Redeemer of men.²⁸

The Holy Spirit's role in sanctification, Torrance makes clear, is a work of renewal toward God in and through Jesus Christ, in which the reality of Jesus' vicarious and redemptive entry fully into fallen, alienated, condemned humanness is made real and available to persons through the adoption and union with Christ that the Spirit effects.

²⁷ "[T]he Cappadocians were able to take even more seriously the Pauline teaching that Christ took upon himself fallen human nature, 'the flesh of sin', 'the body of death', while at the same time sanctifying and recreating it." - Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, 155.

²⁸ Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 248.

Sanctification Through the Spirit as a Transformative Act

Renewal, as Torrance refers to it, could easily be construed as the ongoing work of transformation that has come to be so closely associated with — often even treated as synonymous with — sanctification. However, Torrance's presentation of this renewal offers a slightly different nuance and with significant implications. When he states, "It is to participate in the actualised holiness of Jesus who sanctified himself on our behalf that we might be sanctified in him, in reality,"²⁹ his emphasis on "actualization" and "in reality" certainly implies that transformation in some sense results from Christ's sanctifying work. Yet his insistence that "[t]here is no separate activity of the Holy Spirit in revelation or salvation in addition to or independent of the activity of Christ, for what he does is to empower and actualise the words and works of Christ in our midst as the words and works of the Father,"³⁰ keeps the primary focal point of the Spirit's work in sanctification on what happens *in Christ*. Considerations about the nature of the transformation experience, experientially and phenomenologically, seem not to have been Torrance's primary concern and, in light of how he articulates the Spirit's role in sanctification, may well have loomed for him as a dangerous, anthropocentric diversion from the christological anchor point of the Spirit's sanctifying work.

When Torrance uses transformation language he does so with reference to our participation in the sanctified humanity of Christ. He speaks affirmingly of how Cyril of Alexandria described the effects of the Incarnation on human nature not as transubstantiation but "a transformation of it as through the Spirit it is made to participate in the renewed and sanctified humanity in Christ."³¹ Such participation in Christ by the Spirit can easily be seen in Scripture as having transformative effects on our lives (2 Corinthians 3:14-18). The sanctification or holiness that resides in Christ and becomes ours in Christ through the Spirit constitutes the basis for transformation. Romans 12:1-2, a text commonly used to support the doctrine of progressive sanctification, actually presents holiness as the precondition or basis for

²⁹ Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, 141.

³⁰ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 196.

³¹ Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, 162.

transformation. We can experience transformation only having first presented ourselves to God as holy.

How, though, is that transformation to be understood? What is it? What should be expected of it experientially? The fruit of the Spirit, as outlined in Galatians 5:22-23, condenses many of the character traits that commonly populate the profile of discipleship to which theologies of sanctification orient themselves. Not infrequently, thoughtful Christians will observe to their confusion and consternation that these character traits are observable in non-Christian people just as easily and frequently as in Christians. What, then, makes them unique as evidence of the Holy Spirit's work?

What sets these fruit apart as works of the Spirit is not phenomenological and ontological but christological. Again, Torrance's christological framing of sanctification by the Spirit provides clarification for this type of question. With Eastern Orthodoxy in view he addresses the type of change that the Spirit effects as we exist in Christ.

[T]he Athanasian doctrine of *theosis* or *theopoiesis* through the Spirit, in which we are sanctified, renewed and enlightened through adoption in the incarnate Son to be sons of God, does not import any inner deification of our human nature, but the assuming of us into the sphere of the direct and immediate activity of God himself in such a way that our human being is brought to its *teleiosis* in relation to the Creator and we find our real life hid with Christ in God.³²

In elaborating on Athanasius' view of the Spirit, Torrance places the focus of the Spirit's work on how the Spirit draws the Christian into proximity to God and God's activity so that any change that is brought about in the Christian is understood in that relation. Interestingly, he does not elaborate on the nature of that change (perhaps Torrance would say that it would be dangerous to try to develop it) any further than to speak of the Christian's life as reoriented toward its true purpose.

Any discussion of Torrance's view of the Spirit's role in sanctification will be incomplete without mention of the ecclesial dimensions of that work. To be

³² Ibid., 234.

sanctified in Christ is not merely or even primarily an individual matter but is to be sanctified into the body of Christ. He refers to “the sanctifying mission of the Spirit in establishing the people of God as the Body of Christ.”³³ He also speaks of “the sanctification of the Church through Christ and in the Spirit whereby it participates in the eternal life of the Triune God.”³⁴ Here Torrance clearly sees a core function or role of the Spirit in sanctification as drawing the Church into God’s life, which could be another way of saying it draws the Church into the immediate presence of God.

Conclusion

No small amount of mystery still resides in the subject of the Holy Spirit’s role in sanctification. While sanctification as a work of the Holy Spirit is a clear and recurring theme, we are still without clear answers to some puzzling questions, many of which emerge from assumptions that have been superimposed on the topic. In reaction to the way sanctification was treated in late medieval Roman Catholic theology, some Reformation traditions have treated sanctification as a second and subsequent act of God.³⁵ This helped pave the way for sanctification to become an umbrella term for the ongoing experience of Christian growth and discipleship, whatever variations exist in how that experience is described and understood to iterate by different traditions. Since the Holy Spirit is clearly presented as the divine agent of sanctification, at least in the New Testament, the question of the Spirit’s role in sanctification is commonly simply another way of asking about the Spirit’s role in that ongoing experience of growth and discipleship, i.e., transformation. This presents yet another example of the methodological importance of examining our assumptions and making sure that our questions fit the nature of the case.

A reorientation to the doctrine of sanctification and specifically the role of the Holy Spirit in sanctification begins with a recalibration. As Oliver O’Donovan clarifies

³³ Ibid., 60.

³⁴ Ibid., 17.

³⁵ Admittedly, this is a generalization that encompasses numerous variations. For a more detailed treatment of how this reaction iterated through various Protestant theological traditions see my *Already Sanctified*, 13-38.

when speaking about justification and sanctification, “There is not one work of God and then a second, but two points of purchase of one work, representative and incorporated aspects of our solidarity with the Redeemer through the Holy Spirit.”³⁶ Clarification about the role of the Holy Spirit in sanctification begins with a proper reincorporation of the doctrine of sanctification into soteriology, rescuing it from the ancillary space of “Christian living.”³⁷

The reorientation continues with a clarification that the composite and consistent witness of Scripture is that sanctification, effected by the Holy Spirit, has far more to do with being fitted for the presence of God in Jesus Christ and fitted for service to God through Jesus Christ. Ethical, characterological, and transformative implications of sanctification are profound but derivative — not the central focus — of what it means for the Holy Spirit to sanctify people. As Richard Lints observes, “Holiness is not about the changes that the Spirit effects in the life of the church, but about the presence of the Holy Spirit himself.”³⁸

An initial navigational miscalculation has occurred when the Holy Spirit’s role in sanctification is explored from assumptions derived from experiential or phenomenological starting points, i.e., to understand how the Spirit effects spiritual transformation. That is not to imply that the Spirit is not involved in Christian transformation. Most certainly, the Spirit is so involved. Rather, transformation into Christ’s image emerges as the effects of what the Scripture clearly and predominantly portrays as the work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification — to prepare people for and bring them into the presence of the living God, then to equip them for acceptable service to God. The Holy Spirit — the One whose holiness is the holiness of God — does all this in expression of the relational life of the triune God, toward the Father and through the Son. Christology provides both the telos of the Spirit’s work in sanctification and the defining calibrations of that work from the

³⁶ Oliver O’Donovan, *Entering into Rest: Ethics as Theology*, pt. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 75.

³⁷ This relegation is illustrated by years of personal experience with a prominent academic society in which academic paper proposals on sanctification are consistently placed in sections on “Spiritual Formation” and never in “Systematic Theology.”

³⁸ Richard Lints, “Living by Faith — Alone?” in *Sanctification: Explorations in Theology and Practice*, 46.

outset. When those navigational calibrations are underattended the work of the Spirit in sanctification is reduced to its iterative effects and the overall doctrine of sanctification takes on disproportions from being shaped more by anthropology than by Christology and soteriology.

In even his most intense scholarly work T. F. Torrance reflects a consistent if implicit concern for the lived Christian experience and how theology affects it. While he did not participate in the sanctification discussions and controversies that have characterized much evangelical literature in the twentieth century, his observations about the Holy Spirit and sanctification stand as a rather prophetic recalibration of the doctrine to its biblical origins. His relentless attention to the vicarious humanity of Christ and everything that entails for the Christian through the Holy Spirit provides a framework in which the work of the Spirit in sanctification is recaptured and reconnected to its animating source. In that sanctifying christological connection, created and sustained through the Spirit, we find our lives — our true selves and purpose — in the presence of the living, Holy One. That will transform us even if the process and phenomena of the transformation experience vary.