

ON THE RENEWAL OF INTEREST IN THE DOCTRINE OF SANCTIFICATION: A METHODOLOGICAL REMINDER

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By now it goes without saying that along with the resurgence of interest in “spirituality” within our general Western culture there is also a renewal of interest in “Christian spirituality” amongst Christian believers. Surely within evangelicalism there is a movement afoot, if not already in full swing. My present concern is that evangelical theologians may fail to do their part in providing theoretical (i.e. theological) guidance to those who are examining again, or for the first time, what amounts to the Christian doctrine of sanctification. For whatever the motives of those who are thirsty for a deeper spiritual life, what they are seeking is a legitimate domain of Christian theology. Hence, in the midst of the flurry of popular writing and teaching on spiritual formation, evangelical theologians have a duty to offer a biblical presentation of the doctrine of sanctification in a clear, coherent, and comprehensive manner that is at the same time relevant to the lives of contemporary Christian believers. As Robert Rakestraw points out, there is a “crying need for a robust, Biblical theology of the Christian life that will refute and replace the plethora of false spiritualities plaguing Church and society.”¹

But the doctrine of sanctification is tricky. First, it is a complex doctrine in that it is the culmination of conclusions reached in just about every other theological category (e.g. theological anthropology, hamartiology, soteriology, Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, etc.). Furthermore, it is a doctrine about which thinkers in other disciplines besides theology have something significant to say (e.g. psychologists). And lastly, the legitimacy of the doctrine can be tested in the actual lives of believers. It is truly where the theological rubber meets the road.²

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¹ Robert V. Rakestraw, “Becoming Like God: An Evangelical Doctrine of Theosis,” *JETS* 40 (1997) 257.

² This last point deserves bearing out. Each of us have an intimate acquaintance with the Christian life, and perhaps more than with any other doctrine our particular perspective influences the theological craft. For instance, our experience, and lack thereof, subtly affects our delineation of the doctrine. We must take care not to make normative generalizations regarding the Christian life unaware that we do so from within what St. John of the Cross termed “the dark night of the soul” or, alternatively, out of some atypical spiritual bliss. We need to be often reminded of the human tendency to develop theoretical views that accommodate or make sense of our own personal experience, in this case, to the detriment of those we influence. I am indebted to Dennis DelValle for bringing this point to my attention.

In all of this, the worry is that in our eagerness to respond to those who buy books, go to conferences, organize retreats, and take classes on the spiritual life, we are in danger of muddying the waters when there is such an opportunity to lead with clarity of speech, depth of thought, and true insight regarding the nature of the way of Christ. The outcome of this muddying may be that “spiritual formation” becomes just another passing evangelical fad.

With this concern in mind, I intend to bring to light a bit of the contemporary confusion regarding Christian spirituality and surface some methodological approaches to this domain of knowledge that serve to perpetuate this confusion. I will then offer a methodological approach to the doctrine of sanctification that has the potential to dispel the fog that has descended on discussions of the nature of Christian spirituality. In particular, I maintain that there is a proper theo-methodological approach that addresses in a principled way doctrinal issues which are logically prior, systematically pervasive, and theologically fundamental to an evangelical theology of Christian spirituality.

I. THE CONTEMPORARY CONFUSION

1. *Terminology and the goal of sanctification.* I will begin with a note about terminology, for semantic issues are partly responsible for the confusion that arises in current discussions of sanctification.³ There is a collection of terms that represent a new vocabulary for evangelicalism when it comes to discussing what up until recently would have been referred to as spiritual growth, Christian living, sanctification, or discipleship. But new movements inevitably bring new vocabularies, and so we now speak of Christian spirituality, spiritual transformation, character formation, and spiritual theology. Whatever subtle nuances might be given to each term, what seems clear is that they all (both old and new) refer to *the nature of spiritual maturation from the time of regeneration to the time of glorification*. In this broad sense, I will take all the above terms as synonymous for the purposes of this paper. Most often I will refer to this domain of inquiry as the doctrine or theology of sanctification, for this is the category of systematic theology that maps the stated area of thought.

The pivotal element in one’s doctrine of sanctification will be the goal or *telos* of sanctification, for without an explicit destination it is impossible to develop a mental map of the nature of this maturation process.⁴ Furthermore, our conception of this destination determines the value of spiritual formation. There is no easier path to works righteousness and legalism than to have a mistaken or confused notion of the goal of spiritual growth.⁵

³ For a helpful treatment of some of the terminological confusion, see D. A. Carson, “When is Spirituality Spiritual? Reflections on some Problems of Definition,” *JETS* 37 (1994) 381–94.

⁴ For more on the goal of sanctification, see Diogenes Allen, *Spiritual Theology* (Cambridge MA: Cowley, 1997) 7–36.

⁵ D. A. Carson poignantly writes, “If the kingdom of God has to do with ‘righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit’ (Rom. 14:18), we must not reduce it to righteousness and systems of thought” (“Spirituality” 392).

And if the *telos* is unclear, then a treatment of the object, agents, means, and dynamics of sanctification will inevitably be unclear as well. The goal of sanctification is what orders and organizes the other essential elements of one's understanding of Christian growth. Lastly, the goal of sanctification should be what propels us forward in our spiritual growth. Persons eager to get on with their spiritual journeys will be quickly disillusioned if the identifiable guides cannot simply state the ultimate end. Thus, clarity on the *telos* of sanctification appears crucial. And yet, it is on this precise issue that there seems to be extensive conceptual confusion.

2. *Divergent views of the goal of sanctification.* There are several ways we could demonstrate this conceptual confusion. Certainly amongst laity there is no agreed-upon answer to the question of the goal of spiritual growth. My own informal surveys yield the following typical answers to the question, What is the goal of spiritual growth?: freedom from sin, service to God, righteousness, experiential awareness of God, evangelism, being filled with the Spirit, intimate relationship with God, holiness, union with Christ, doing God's will, walking in the Spirit, glorifying God, Christlikeness, godliness, being in the Word, etc. These multifarious responses can be forgiven though, for many of these concepts can be easily found in current popular-level writings on the doctrine of sanctification.

For instance, Mike Wilkins writes, "becoming like Jesus is the overarching goal of the entire Christian life. . . . Paul elsewhere confirmed that the ultimate goal for those God called is to be 'conformed to the image of his Son.'"⁶ Once this is taken as the goal, "discipleship" becomes the obvious means of being conformed to the image of Christ. Wilkins has extremely valuable things to say about the nature of discipleship, and thus about the doctrine of sanctification. And certainly Wilkins is right—"Christlikeness" is the *telos* of sanctification.

And yet, other answers also appear right. In Richard Foster's groundbreaking book, *Celebration of Discipline*, he writes, "The life that is pleasing to God is not a series of religious duties. We have only one thing to do, namely, to experience a life of relationship and intimacy with God . . ."⁷ Henry Blackaby and Claude King concur, "God has far more in store for your life than just to do something for Him. He wants you to experience an intimate love relationship with Him that is real and personal."⁸ Blackaby and King later tell their readers that this love relationship with God is "the very purpose of your life."⁹ Alistair McGrath weighs in here as well. McGrath writes, "Christian spirituality may be thus understood as the way in which Christian individuals or groups aim to deepen their experience of God, or to

⁶ Michael J. Wilkins, *In His Image: Reflecting Christ in Everyday Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1997) 25, cf. 37–38. See also Wilkins's excellent work, *Following the Master: Discipleship in the Steps of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

⁷ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: Harper-SanFrancisco, 1978) 4.

⁸ Henry T. Blackaby and Claude V. King, *Experiencing God: How to Live the Full Adventure of Knowing and Doing the Will of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994) 1.

⁹ *Ibid.* 79.

‘practise the presence of God.’¹⁰ Foster, Blackaby/King, and McGrath are tapping into a long tradition within Christian spirituality of finding the *telos* of sanctification in some sort of relational union with God. And so “relationship with God” also appears to possess the pedigree to warrant being the goal of sanctification.

Turning to another group of authors, we find the goal being described in a completely different fashion. In the book, *Christian Spirituality: Five Views on Sanctification*, Donald Alexander sets up the discussion of sanctification as pertaining to the “liberation from the tyranny of sin” and to “a life of holiness.”¹¹ In Alexander’s own treatment of the doctrine he understands sanctification as promising “freedom from the tyranny of sin’s control and the capacity to walk in righteousness and holiness.”¹² Jerry Bridges writes in the same vein. Bridges finds the goal of sanctification in “Christ’s objective for us.” According to Bridges, Christ’s objective is “to make us holy—to purify us from the pollution of sin in our lives. He intends to be Lord of our lives, and He intends that we exhibit the traits of godly character.”¹³ Thus, for Alexander and Bridges the goal of sanctification appears to be laying aside sin and putting on godly character—i.e. “moral transformation.”

The options do not stop here. In his, *Keeping in Step with the Spirit*, J. I. Packer conceives of sanctification as being “life in the Spirit.”¹⁴ Packer writes, “The way of sanctification, from our point of view, is to ‘walk in [by] the Spirit’ (Galatians 5:16).”¹⁵ So in Packer’s work we find the central goal of the Christian life to be to live out our lives in and through the Holy Spirit. This is because, “The Christian’s life in all its aspects . . . is supernatural; only the Spirit can initiate and sustain it.”¹⁶

On yet a different note, Dallas Willard proposes that the ultimate goal of spiritual transformation is the enabling of human persons to effectively rule with God in his Kingdom. Willard writes:

[W]e are made to “have dominion” within an appropriate domain of reality. This is the core of the likeness or image of God in us and is the basis of the destiny for which we were formed. We are, all of us, never-ceasing spiritual beings with a unique eternal calling to count for good in God’s great universe. . . . In creating human beings God made them to rule, to reign, to have dominion in a limited sphere. Only so can they be persons.¹⁷

¹⁰ Alistair McGrath, *Christian Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999) 3.

¹¹ Donald L. Alexander, ed., *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1988) 8–10.

¹² Donald L. Alexander, *The Pursuit of Godliness: Sanctification in Christological Perspective* (New York: University Press of America, 1999) 6.

¹³ Jerry Bridges, *The Practice of Godliness* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1996) 217. Bridges sees his earlier book, *The Pursuit of Holiness*, as pertaining to “putting off the old self—dealing with sin in our lives” and his sequel, *The Practice of Godliness*, focuses on “putting on the new self—growing in Christian character” (p. 7).

¹⁴ J. I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit* (Old Tappan: Revell, 1984). See also Packer, “The Holy Spirit: God at Work,” *Christianity Today* 34/5 (March 19, 1990) 27–35.

¹⁵ Packer, *Keep in Step* 72.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 9.

¹⁷ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998) 21.

Here we see the goal being more functional than relational or moral. In his own way M. Robert Mulholland agrees, defining spiritual formation as, “The process of being conformed to the image of Christ *for the sake of others*.”¹⁸ To forget the other-focused direction of sanctification, claims Mulholland, is to “short-circuit” the entire process.¹⁹ So we can see in Willard and Mulholland the idea that the destination of sanctification is “service to others.”

Without going any further, it is clear that there are the makings of conceptual confusion on this matter. What is the *telos* of sanctification? Is it *Christlikeness*, and if it is, does that mean becoming like Christ in one’s actions, internal life, relationship with the Father, or all of the above? And if the latter, how do these concepts relate together? Or should we really see the goal as a certain kind of *relationship with God*, and Christlikeness as the means towards or perfect exemplification of that relationship? How then would the emphasis on *moral transformation* fit in? If one becomes holy or righteous or godly, then does not one also become Christlike? So perhaps moral transformation is our aim. Though, once again, is this primarily about our external behavior, our thoughts, our passions, our will, or our character? And what about the Holy Spirit? Are we not supposed to *live, walk, and be filled with the Spirit*? Is this a distinct process from the others, is it the same, is there overlap? Then again, we have Willard’s suggestion that Christians are made to rule the earth and reign with God—we are to “count for good in God’s great universe.” So perhaps *service to others* is the overarching goal, and Christlikeness, moral transformation, intimacy with God, and Spirit-filled living are distinct means to this ultimate end?

Now someone might complain that I am unfairly driving a wedge between these largely complementary views. I have no doubt these views are complementary. Some of the proposed goals are of a higher order or more general nature than other more specified goals. Further, there are trinitarian issues at hand as to the manner in which sanctification is related to the Father, to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. And, to be fair, many of the above authors do tie in at least some of these competing concepts.²⁰

My intention is not to critique the above presentations, but rather to show the perplexing array of motifs that can be found in contemporary writings on sanctification. The concern is not that these different emphases are inconsistent or incommensurable, but rather that we do not have a theology of sanctification which shows in what manner they are consistent and commensurable. For as they stand, these distinct views of the Christian life can begin to generate conceptual confusion amongst those digesting the burgeoning spiritual formation literature. If one reads Mulholland, Bridges, and Blackaby/King, for instance, it may be clear that one needs to become conformed to the image of Christ, be morally transformed, and develop a

¹⁸ M. Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993) 15 (emphasis mine).

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 41.

²⁰ For example, see Wilkins, *In His Image* 43–47; Bridges, *Practice of Godliness* 54–55; Packer, *Keep in Step* 71–72; Willard, *Divine Conspiracy* 22–23. Another writer who perceives many of the connections and clearly states them is Gordon T. Smith. See his *On The Way: A Guide to Christian Spirituality* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2001) 60–68.

love relationship with God, but how these distinct concepts are brought together in a cohesive grasp of the Christian life can be fairly baffling. And it is the *bringing together* that is the crux of the issue. Confusion reigns when there is no meta-theory which deals appropriately with divergent theoretical voices. Furthermore, unless there is a more fundamental framework for an evangelical doctrine of sanctification, the congenial assortment of perspectives I gathered above will balloon into an unmanageable and inconsistent set. There is some evidence that this has happened already, for I have not mentioned those models of Christian spirituality that take the *telos* of the Christian life to be mystical union, social justice, charismatic experience, worshipping God, divinization, the beatific vision, and so on.

While it is an empirical fact that each of the above books as well as many other writings and teachings along these same lines have done tremendous good for multitudes of people, there is a danger that the swelling spiritual formation literature, classes, small groups, retreats, and conferences will generate conceptual confusion regarding the nature of sanctification. Those who come to spiritual formation thirsty for guidance may find themselves echoing the words of the seventeenth-century monk Brother Lawrence, "I have found in many books many different ways of going to God and many different practices in living the spiritual life. I began to see that this was only confusing me . . ." ²¹

3. *Sanctification pluralism.* Now, having said all that, one might complain that all I have really accomplished is a not so novel and overly contentious delineation of the five traditions of Christian spirituality that Richard Foster presents most fully in his book, *Streams of Living Water*.²² The emphasis on Christlikeness can be located in what Foster terms the evangelical tradition; the emphasis on moral transformation is found in the holiness tradition; the emphasis on relationship to God is contained in the contemplative tradition; the emphasis on Spirit-filled living is encountered within the charismatic tradition; and the emphasis on service to others is dealt with in the social justice tradition. So should we not just content ourselves that there have been different movements of God's Spirit in Church history and that each of these major movements has some claim to our allegiance? The *telos* of sanctification would then be to maximize each distinct emphasis as well as to reach some kind of equilibrium amongst them.

This is a predictable response to apparent theoretical disagreement. For when we come upon divergent views regarding what is taken to be one and the same reality, it is a common move to suggest that each perspective on the matter possesses a piece of the truth. As with religious pluralism and moral pluralism, why not sanctification pluralism?

The problem with pluralism of any kind is that if we do not actually have knowledge of the reality in question independently of the plurality of per-

²¹ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, quoted from Richard Foster and James Bryan Smith, eds., *Devotional Classics* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990) 82.

²² Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998). See also Foster and Smith, eds., *Devotional Classics*.

spectives, then we cannot develop any criteria to determine which perspectives or which parts of various perspectives correspond to the reality in question. And if we do not have the means to discriminate between the various perspectives or their parts, then all perspectives and each part becomes either equally valid or equally invalid. Relativism or skepticism prevails—take your pick. So we must already have some understanding of sanctification in order to determine which traditions of Christian spirituality and which parts of those traditions are actually helpful in developing a more robust view of the Christian life. Hence, the pluralist approach cannot in principle deal with the conceptual confusion I have adumbrated. It only serves to reinforce it. We must have a doctrine of sanctification before going to Church history to discover ways in which that view has been illuminated.

Furthermore, possessing a plurality of approaches to the Christian life does not necessarily provide one with a comprehensive and coherent understanding of Christian spirituality. Drawing together bits and pieces here and there often only gets one the bits and pieces. For instance, in the book *Devotional Classics*, Foster and co-editor James Bryan Smith emphasize the importance of “balance” in the five traditions. They write, “we are imbalanced and ineffective if we excel in, say, evangelism and prayer but lack holiness of life and compassion for the poor. Each tradition—even our favorite one—will throw us out of balance if it is all we know. Balance comes when we strive to learn from all five, when we recognize their importance, and when we set out to make them a part of our lives.”²³ Foster and Smith have a strong point here. But the problem that persists is whether it even makes sense to think of someone “excelling” in evangelism and prayer but lacking holiness of life and compassion for the poor, or vice versa. Are not all these things intimately connected?

In brief, I believe that taking Foster’s undeniably helpful work as a solution to the problem I am attempting to elucidate is simply to compound the problems. There is an important place for what Foster has done, but it is not as an answer to the question of the *telos* of the Christian life nor as a comprehensive treatment of the doctrine of sanctification.²⁴

4. *When all else fails, punt to mystery.* Another typical response to conceptual confusion quickly presents itself, and that is the appeal to mystery. This too counts as a tradition within Christian spirituality, but it is a tradition that does not ultimately accomplish that much.²⁵ No one denies that

²³ Foster and Smith, *Devotional Classics* 3.

²⁴ I think Foster and Smith would be the first to agree with both points made. Foster is obviously aware of this meta-issue in his *Streams of Living Water*. He has reminders throughout that the prayer-filled life lays the foundation for the Spirit-filled life and the life of holiness, and that these set the stage for the life of social justice and evangelism. For example, see *Streams of Living Water* 237. The appearance of a sixth tradition in *Streams of Living Water*—the incarnational life—reminds us that the other traditions need to be integrated in our practical, embodied existence.

²⁵ It does not accomplish much—except perhaps that an over-generous appeal to mystery often-times breeds heresies and cults. I am particularly thinking of early Christian forms of Gnosticism, which flourished precisely due to their appeal to mystery. It is amazing how far you can take a wildly implausible view if you just invoke mystery often enough and in the right tone of voice.

there is mystery involved in sanctification, but the teachings of Jesus and his friends in the NT effectively counter any proposal that this ought to be our prevailing view of the spiritual life. For what we find in the pages of Scripture is the assumption that there is a clear and effective comprehension of spiritual maturation available to all. For instance, Jesus teaches us: "every good tree bears good fruit" (Matt 6:17); "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me" (Matt 11:29); "from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts . . ." (Mark 7:21); "he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5); etc. And Paul writes, "tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character" (Rom 5:3-4); "be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Rom 12:2); "for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap" (Gal 6:7); "work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you" (Phil 2:12-13); etc.

It is evident in these passages and others that the NT writers present us with and point to a domain of knowledge regarding the nature of spiritual maturation. What is needed for today is a methodological approach to the doctrine of sanctification that takes the area of inquiry seriously as just that—a domain of knowledge that God intends us to understand.

II. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO THE DOCTRINE OF SANCTIFICATION

1. *Three common approaches.* In order to clearly delineate the kind of methodological approach required for a proper treatment of sanctification, it will be helpful to analyze three common approaches to the doctrine. The three approaches I have in mind can be termed: (a) the interesting-problems approach; (b) the schools-of-thought approach; and (c) the narrow-scope approach. I think each of these approaches to sanctification is legitimate and beneficial, but I will also point out the way in which they tend to perpetuate the kind of conceptual confusion I have attempted to surface.

First off, the *interesting-problems approach* to sanctification involves an exclusive treatment of some notable concern within the doctrine of sanctification that is more or less isolated from the doctrine as a whole. For instance, we possess lengthy and insightful theologies of prayer, mentoring, discipleship, spiritual friendship, fasting, the nature of the disciplines, worship, meditation, retreat-taking, etc., but these are all presented without much in the way of a comprehensive theology of sanctification. Thomas Merton announces his intention to take this approach in his *No Man Is An Island*. Merton writes in the introduction, "Leaving system to others, and renouncing the attempt to lay down universal principles which have been exposed by better men elsewhere, I only desire in this book to share with the reader my own reflections on certain aspects of the spiritual life."²⁶ So Merton goes on to help us grasp particular dynamics of the spiritual life, but we are left without any kind of "system" or "universal principles." This kind of approach

²⁶ Thomas Merton, *No Man Is An Island* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1955) ix.

to sanctification does not attempt to provide an underlying theory of spiritual growth or a overarching grasp of the nature of the Christian life. Rather, it shines a penetrating light onto a specific, appealing dimension of sanctification.

There is obviously much to be gained from such an approach to sanctification. We need depth of insight into important areas of Christian spirituality. But the methodological liability is that key assumptions regarding sanctification are backed into rather than dealt with head-on. And even if the particular author or theologian is writing out of a robust and comprehensive theology of sanctification, often the reader is coming at it piecemeal. So if one is only exposed to these detached points of intrigue, the larger picture of the doctrine of sanctification is lost. We are unable to see the forest for the trees.

The *schools-of-thought approach* is the method of taking some great thinker on Christian spirituality (e.g. Augustine, St. John of the Cross, John Calvin) or some theological tradition (e.g. Lutheran, Reformed, Wesleyan) and constructing one's view along these pre-established lines. The categories or emphases may change, but the general content remains consistent with the school of thought. For instance, Margaret Hebblethwaite develops a profitable treatment of Ignatian spirituality, J. I. Packer has an excellent study of Puritan spirituality, and there are two separate books which helpfully divide the theological terrain into "five views" of sanctification.²⁷

Once again, this approach to sanctification is extremely profitable. The realization that we are a part of a historical tradition is essential to theological method, and it is true arrogance to refuse to investigate those who have gone before us. Also, there is a good chance that on this approach one will come upon a comprehensive view of sanctification, for well-grounded schools of thought often have had the time and wisdom to deal with the wealth of issues involved.

And yet, there are limitations here, too. One such limitation is that we are not Ignatians or Puritans or capable of maintaining five views at once (let alone two distinct sets of five views!), and so while we can learn and borrow from these various schools of thought, our own theology of sanctification must eventually come to fruition independently of them. Of course, we might closely associate ourselves with this or that tradition, but this by no means ensures that we will inherit a single or unified conception of sanctification from our tradition. Is there a consensual Reformed view of sanctification, for instance?²⁸ There is also the problem of relevance, for a portrayal of sanctification that was dynamic in Calvin's time may no longer be as meaningful to us today. We need to take ownership of the theological process that has been handed down and not simply recommunicate what others

²⁷ Margaret Hebblethwaite, *Way of St. Ignatius: Finding God in all things* (London: Harper-Collins, 1987); J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1990); Melvin E. Deiter et al., *Five Views on Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987); Alexander, ed., *Christian Spirituality*.

²⁸ Apparently there is not. See Randall Gleason, "B. B. Warfield and Lewis S. Chafer on Sanctification," *JETS* 40 (1997) 241-56.

have said. Finally, if a school of thought has failed to address some fundamental issue or distorts some essential doctrinal element, the schools-of-thought approach only reproduces these warped views.

The third common approach to the study of sanctification is the *narrow-scope approach*. This method tackles the whole doctrine of sanctification head-on (unlike the first approach) in our contemporary setting (unlike the second approach), but in doing so foundational theological issues are implicitly assumed and/or a favored motif is expounded at the expense of a more robust treatment. In other words, the scope of the resultant theological treatment is comparatively narrow. Often this is due to restrictions of time and space on one's development of the doctrine and such brevity of discussion is typically necessary for various practical reasons.

Nevertheless, the narrow-scope approach can perpetuate conceptual confusion as well. For instance, one theology of sanctification might make much of the classical spiritual disciplines. The unstated theological assumption beneath this is that the human will is a primary agent in spiritual formation. Another theology of sanctification stresses the sacraments and has nothing to say about the disciplines. The silent theological assumption here is that the human will is largely passive in spiritual maturity. Of course deep and gnarly theological issues abound, but mention of these (let alone in-depth discussion) is passed over on the narrow-scope approach, leaving the reader to sort out what appears to the theologically unenlightened as a mere difference of emphasis. Another exemplification of the narrow-scope approach is when a certain biblical motif of the Christian life is developed (e.g. discipleship, walking in the Spirit, holiness) without a clear connection with other dominant biblical motifs, as was discussed earlier in this paper.

This, of course, is all very understandable. And there is a great need for and great value in the narrow-scope approach to the doctrine of sanctification, just as there is a great need for and great value in the schools-of-thought and interesting-problems approaches. But as regards the conceptual confusion that surrounds Christian spirituality, these methodologies are of little avail. What is needed is a distinct methodological approach.

2. *The doctrinal precursors approach.* What I have to say here is nothing new. It is simply a methodological reminder and a call to arms to evangelical systematic theologians. For the most likely path out of the confusion I have portrayed is *via* a systematic treatment of the doctrine of sanctification. Or better yet, several systematic treatments that can serve as a well-spring for other kinds of more focused or popular works on the doctrine.²⁹

The central premise of the *doctrinal precursors approach* is that there exist certain prior, pervasive, and fundamental theological commitments that must be negotiated before coming to an understanding of the goal, ob-

²⁹ To my knowledge, the only recent steps in this direction are David Petersen's *Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) and Simon Chan's *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998).

ject, agents, means, and dynamics of sanctification. I say “prior” in the sense that these issues are *logically* prior, that is, the doctrine of sanctification necessarily builds on conclusions reached in other theological categories (in particular, theological methodology, theological anthropology, harmartiology, and soteriology). I say “pervasive” in the sense that these logically prior issues are *systematically* pervasive, that is, they continually reappear when dealing with issues pertaining to Christian spirituality (for instance, one’s understanding of the nature of sin influences every aspect of the doctrine of sanctification). And I say “fundamental” in the sense that the logically prior and systematically pervasive issues are *theologically* fundamental, that is, they are some of the bedrock categories in traditional systematic theology (for example, the determination of one’s theological sources makes all the difference in one’s doctrine of sanctification). If these theologically fundamental issues are systematically dealt with according to their logical priority, then one’s doctrine of sanctification will be birthed quite naturally. Theological clarity in these foundational areas will result in theological clarity when it comes to the doctrine of sanctification.³⁰

3. *Two points of clarification.* First, it might be said that I am simply reminding us that we need to be good systematic theologians if we are going to wax eloquent on a topic of systematic theology. Exactly. But I also mean to encourage us to make our deeper theological commitments explicit in our teachings and writings on sanctification; otherwise it gives the appearance of one or more of the approaches addressed above. Moreover, I want to encourage us to bring to bear more fully our broader theological framework to the doctrine of sanctification. The doctrine of sanctification is often one of the smallest chapters in our evangelical systematics.³¹ Typically this is because all of the main issues are handled under other theological categories. But perhaps it is time to mention all the other issues handled elsewhere when we are treating the doctrine of sanctification. The doctrine of sanctification needs to be related more explicitly to the doctrine of God, human nature, sin, the atonement, justification, regeneration, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, etc. Otherwise, the doctrine is quickly reduced to a conversation about external moral transformation.

My second clarification is that I am not actually so optimistic to think that the doctrinal precursors approach will eradicate all genuine disagreements and that various emphases will be consolidated in favor of one

³⁰ A nice, but partial, example of what I am proposing is Dallas Willard’s forthcoming book *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002). In this book Willard begins with a thoughtful theological anthropology, harmartiology, and soteriology which generates a lucid treatment of spiritual transformation. While Willard is writing for a popular audience and not theologians, the overall structure of his approach fits with what I am recommending here.

³¹ See, for instance, Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 746–62; and Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) 967–83. Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest’s chapter on sanctification is a much needed corrective. See Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 173–236.

universal, evangelical theology of sanctification! Indeed, evangelical theologians disagree in many ways throughout the various doctrinal categories I mention and so it goes without saying that we will have disagreement when it comes to the doctrine of sanctification. But at least we will know where our disagreement lies. More often than not the root of it will be a deeper theological conclusion in some other category rather than a superficial difference at the level of sanctification. And yet, I am definitely contending that there will be less confusion in the views of sanctification that are put forward, if the methodology I am reminding us of is adopted more regularly and such systematic treatments are appealed to by others.

III. CONCLUSION

What I have attempted to do in this article is point out some of the conceptual confusion regarding the nature of spiritual formation and to remind us of the importance of a doctrinal precursors approach in treating the doctrine of sanctification. My hope is that evangelical systematic theologians will take up a leadership role as theoretical guides in the current renewal of interest in sanctification with the aim of clarifying the issues involved. Dear Brother Lawrence had the fortitude to carry on in his spiritual search despite the conceptual confusion regarding sanctification that went on around him. Many evangelicals do the same today, though it is a pressing concern that many will also become disillusioned and frustrated with the Christian life, as they are confronted with a welter of divergent perspectives. This is a problem that the body of Christ is equipped to do something about. And evangelical theologians have a unique and indispensable role to play in the solution.³²

³² I am appreciative of conversations with John Coe, Dennis DelValle, Alicia Porter, Terry Smith, and Dallas Willard regarding the content of this paper.