Preaching and Definitive Sanctification

MICHAEL CHRIST

Abstract

This article proceeds from the assumption that the way a preacher conceptualizes a Christian's identity in Christ shapes how he brings moral exhortation to the congregation. The concept of definitive sanctification—first coined by John Murray and developed by Richard Gaffin and others—identifies the believer as, in some sense, holy in Christ. This is not the holiness of imputed righteousness but a renovative change. Moreover, having been made holy, believers must act according to the logic of their identity in Christ. Three implications for preaching emerge from definitive sanctification: (1) preaching Christ and moral commands must be kept together, (2) the biblical indicative and imperative must inform each other, and (3) preaching must be eschatologically oriented.

Keywords

Sanctification, John Murray, preaching, eschatology, definitive sanctification, union with Christ

---

John Murray coined the term "definitive sanctification" to refer to that aspect of our holiness that is settled the moment we believe. If believers are definitively sanctified (and I understand that this is a big *if*, for the topic is fraught with controversy), what relevance does this have for how we preach and for the kind of moral exhortation we give in sermons?

To put it another way, I am not so much talking about a specific kind of preaching or, still less, what a preacher should say. In the main, I think preaching should be expositional, that is, "preaching that takes for the point of a sermon the point of a particular passage of Scripture."[1] And yet, we come to every text with certain assumptions about the nature of the congregation's covenantal relationship with God and our role as preachers to establish and guard that relationship. How might definitive sanctification inform these assumptions? How might these assumptions inform how we preach?

First, I want to lay out a summary of the biblical support for definitive sanctification. Following this, I will draw out three principles for preaching that are either based upon or strengthened through this biblical truth.

I. *What Is Definitive Sanctification?*

Definitive sanctification describes the real change that has taken place in the nature of every believer at the outset of his or her Christian life. As Murray explains, we recognize many aspects of our salvation as having a once-for-all quality about them, such as calling, regeneration, justification, and adoption. Definitive sanctification implies that a definitive aspect of sanctification also belongs to this category of once-for-all benefits.[2] Affirming this is not to deny that believers still sin, nor does it obviate the need to grow in holiness over time; indeed, our growth in Christ is another aspect of sanctification that we call "progressive."[3] But to affirm definitive sanctification is to recognize that a decisive change forms part of the prerequisite for all historical growth. In other words, definitive sanctification answers to our depravity and inability so that we can respond positively to God's commands. Without the definitive aspect of sanctification, there would be no progress in holiness.

The Scriptures bear witness to this definitive reality in at least three ways: (1) the words that Scripture uses to speak of sanctification, (2) the architectonic structure of our salvation in union with Christ, and (3) the organization of the biblical ethic such that a real change in the believer's nature precedes all historical growth.

---

[1] Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 44.

[2] John Murray, "Definitive Sanctification," *Calvin Theological Journal* 2.1 (1967): 5.

[3] See John Murray, "Progressive Sanctification," in *Select Lectures in Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 of *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 294–304.

1. *Words That Refer to Sanctification*

First, as Murray points out in his landmark article, many of the words that Scripture uses to speak of sanctification refer to a definitive reality.[4]

The verb *hagiazō* (ἁγιάζω, to sanctify) is used at least three times to refer to sanctification as a settled reality:

- "To those *sanctified* in Christ Jesus, called to be saints" (1 Cor 1:2).
- "But you were washed, you were *sanctified*, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor 6:11).
- "We have been *sanctified* through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Heb 10:10).

The noun *hagiasmos* (ἁγιασμός; sanctification, consecration, holiness) also refers to a once-for-all idea. "And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and *sanctification* and redemption" (1 Cor 1:30). Other uses of this word would seem to imply a once-for-all reality but are less decisive (1 Thess 4:7; 2 Thess 2:13; 1 Pet 1:2).

It is also significant that the word *hagios* (ἅγιος, holy one or saint) is used often to describe all believers without any reference to a special class or level of maturity:

- "All the *saints* greet you" (Phil 4:21).
- "To equip the *saints* for the work of ministry" (Eph 4:12).

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that every believer is a "saint"—a "holy one"—which points to some basic sense of sanctification in all believers.

Murray concludes, "It would be a deflection from biblical patterns of language and conception to think of sanctification exclusively in terms of a progressive work."[5] Thus, Scripture compels us to recognize a definitive quality to our sanctification.

2. *The Structure of Our Salvation in Union with Christ*

We also see a definitive sense of sanctification emerge when we look at our salvation through the lens of our union with Christ and the resulting participation in his person. We will begin by considering how sanctification fits into the scope of Christ's saving work.

---

[4] Murray, "Definitive Sanctification," 5–6.

[5] Ibid., 6.

Christ accomplished our redemption for us by obediently taking the curse in our place so that we would not experience it. But God raised him from the dead, exalted him to his right hand, and gave him the promised Holy Spirit (Acts 2:33). This implies a change in the person of Christ—not, of course, in his divine nature but according to his human nature, as he transitioned from his state of humiliation to his state of exaltation.

Paul highlights this transition throughout his corpus: "For he was crucified in weakness but lives by the power of God" (2 Cor 13:4). "Lives" is best thought of as manifesting resurrection life, and "power" is the work of the Spirit to raise him from the dead. He "was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom 1:3–4)—note the Spirit's agency in Christ's resurrection. Furthermore, "He *became* Life-Giving Spirit" (1 Cor 15:45).[6] These verses show a progression in Christ's life: he becomes something new. "By that experience [Christ] was and remains a changed man in the truest and deepest—in fact, eschatological—sense."[7]

In Christ's eschatological glory he overturns what was broken and advances the world order to its God-appointed end. Christ delivers a decisive death blow to the old age—that realm in which Satan rules, sin dominates, and death reigns—and Christ constitutes the new age, the new creation reality, also known as "the kingdom of God." In his resurrection, the new age has begun.

We who belong to Christ partake of his new age. In Christ we have been "transferred from the *domain* of darkness into the *kingdom* of his beloved son" (Col 1:14). Our relationship with the world has definitively changed: "I am crucified to the world and the world to me" (Gal 6:14). We are no longer of the flesh but of the Spirit (Rom 8:9). Through the law we die to the law so that we no longer serve according to the oldness of the written code but the newness of the Spirit (Rom 7:6). In sum: "If anyone is in Christ, it is a matter of new creation: behold the old has passed away, the new has come" (2 Cor 5:17).[8]

---

[6] For this translation, see Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *By Faith, Not by Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 44.

[7] Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "'Life-Giving Spirit': Probing the Center of Paul's Pneumatology," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41.4 (December 1998): 581.

[8] Translation by Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "Romans" (lectures delivered at Westminster Theological Seminary, Glenside, PA, fall 2006). The translation "new creature" (NAS, KJV) surely misses the point. The second "he" in the ESV is not in the Greek text. Literally, Paul says, "If anyone is in Christ, new creation." Gaffin's rendering, "It is a matter of new creation," best captures Paul's thought.

One of the benefits that we receive in our union with the resurrected Christ is sanctification. In Romans 6, Paul points to the newness of Christ in his death and resurrection in order to explain why believers have a new nature. Christ has "died to sin once and for all," and he has been raised to live unto God (v. 10). "Death is no longer master over him" (v. 9). Christ's death and resurrection constitute what we could call (with appropriate qualification) "Christ's sanctification."[9] We must be clear that Christ never actually committed sin, nor did he even assume a corrupt nature. But he did enter the evil age, and he did voluntarily submit himself under it so that he could break its power. Moreover, his resurrection constituted a new phase of the God-man's relationship to his Father. In his resurrection life, he was, is, and always will be "alive to God."

In becoming united to Christ, the believer enjoys a similar decisive change with reference to sin and death and a new orientation to God. Believers have died to sin (Rom 6:2–5) and are raised to walk in newness of life (v. 4), and the power of sin is decisively broken (v. 6). It is probably best to take *oitines* (οἵτινες) in v. 2 as qualitive and to understand the meaning as "we who are the *kind* of people who died to sin."[10] We obtain this new nature because we are united to Christ who became new himself.

Bringing together what we have seen so far, definitive sanctification comes into view when we consider that what Christ has "become for us" (1 Cor 1:30) includes sanctification, and, therefore, sanctification is applied to us in our union with him. It also explains why our sanctification must include a definitive aspect. No one is partially united to Christ; therefore, in a very important sense, all believers are definitively sanctified—hence the many references to sanctification as a completed reality for all believers (see above).

To clarify definitive sanctification further, we should note that this decisive change is not just another way of describing justification. Justification is a forensic benefit: God declares us legally righteous, irrespective of our actual nature (Rom 4:5—"[God] justifies the *ungodly*"). In definitive sanctification, however, God changes our nature so that we are constituted as righteous ("how shall we who [are the kind of person who] died to sin still live in it?" [Rom 6:2]). In justification, righteousness is imputed. In sanctification, it is infused.

John Calvin's commentary on Romans 6 helpfully explains why merely being justified is not enough. Justification alone will not curtail sin because

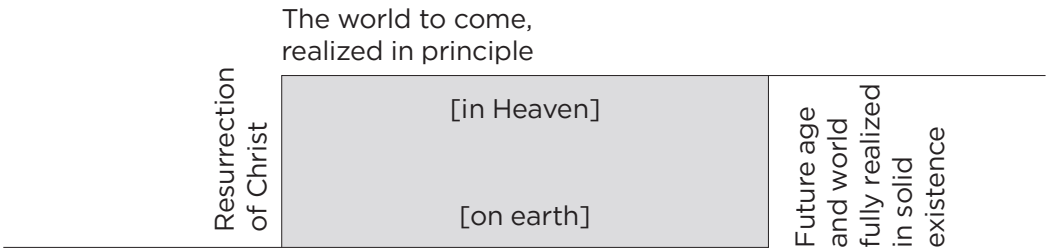
---

[9] Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul's Soteriology*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), 124.

[10] See John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 1:213.

"nothing is more natural than that the flesh should indulge itself under any excuse."[11] In other words, if we only had justification, our fallen state would naturally use it as an excuse to remain in sin. (Hence, Paul's question in Romans 6:1 arises organically out of his discussion on justification.) However, we do not only have justification; we also have sanctification, which is a change in our nature that prompts us to use justification as a warrant to move toward God in love and adoration. It is best to see definitive sanctification and justification as distinct and inseparable benefits simultaneously given in our union with Christ.[12] And it is best to see our progressive sanctification as a result of both justification and definitive sanctification working together.

But why does definitive sanctification not involve entire sanctification?[13] The answer lies in the relationship of the new age to the old age. The old and new ages do not sit side by side, the new beginning precisely where the old ends. Instead, the new age has only begun to be realized; it awaits full consummation at Christ's return. Likewise, while the old age is passing away, it is not yet destroyed. We live within the overlap of the two ages, as Geerhardus Vos illustrated in this diagram:[14]



We live inside the box, between the first and second coming of Christ. This means that we live in a time when the "inner man"—that perspective on the total person that looks through the lens of union with Christ in his

[11] John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. and ed. John Owen, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom38/calcom38.x.i.html.

[12] Robert Letham, *Union with Christ: In Scripture, History, and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011).

[13] "Entire sanctification" is the idea that Christians are brought to a place of complete perfection in this life. From the Church of the Nazarene: "We believe that entire sanctification is that act of God, subsequent to regeneration, by which believers are made free from original sin, or depravity, and brought into a state of entire devotement to God, and the holy obedience of love made perfect" ("Christian Holiness and Entire Sanctification," *Church Manual 2017–2021*, https://2017.manual.nazarene.org/section/christian-holiness-and-entire-sanctification).

[14] Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994), 38.

resurrection glory—is being renewed day by day, while the "outer man"—our life from the perspective of our physical existence headed to the grave—is wasting away.[15] Because of the two-age overlap, our life in Christ is real; we have been raised with him and seated with him (Eph 2:3–4), and even glorification can be considered part of our present reality in Christ (2 Cor 3:18 and possibly Rom 8:30). And yet, the fullness of this reality is not yet openly manifested. Thus, we are tempted, we suffer, we sin, we die. We walk by faith, not by sight, waiting for the appearance of Christ, when we will also be revealed in glory with him (Col 3:4). There is still a "not yet" to our holiness. "All does not yet gleam with glory, but all is being purified."[16]

3. *The Structure of the New Testament Ethics*

Finally, we see definitive sanctification in the way that the New Testament ethics requires a change in nature prior to a change in behavior.

The sinful nature inherited from Adam creates a situation of radical depravity resulting in total inability to please God. Jesus affirms, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). "Nothing" should be understood in an ethical sense. Scripture stresses our inability so that we despair of ever producing holiness by ourselves, and instead we run to Christ, who instructs us, "Abide in me and you will bear much fruit" (John 15:4). Our union with Christ actualizes the possibility of real obedience because in union with Christ we become new people.[17] Murray explains: "If we accept the biblical witness to human depravity and iniquity, then there must be a radical breach with sin in its power and defilement if the demands of the biblical ethic are even to begin to be realized in us."[18] This "radical breach" is another way of describing definitive sanctification.

One of the clearest examples of this ethical structure is Ephesians 2. God saves us by grace, not of ourselves (v. 8), and more specifically, "not of works" (v. 9). Thus, salvation comes solely from God. But immediately after this, Paul explains that we are created in Christ Jesus *for good works* (v. 10). Thus, our salvation is not *of* works, but it is *for* works. The *sine qua non* factor that moves us from a situation where works are impossible to us walking "in

---

[15] Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight*, 61–65.

[16] Martin Luther, "An Argument in Defense of All the Articles of Dr. Martin Luther Wrongly Condemned in the Papal Bull," trans. C. M. Jacobs, in *Works of Martin Luther: with Introductions and Notes*, vol. 3, ed. Henry Eyster Jacobs and Adolph Spaeth (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman & the Castle Press, 1930), 31.

[17] See J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 35–37.

[18] John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 203.

good works" (v. 10) is the re-creative work of God in the context of our union with Christ—that is, definitive sanctification. In fact, this section (vv. 8–10) explains Paul's statements in the previous section (vv. 3–6), where he tells us that we were dead in sin "but God made us alive together with Christ … and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places." More riches of this passage could be mined,[19] but suffice it to say, a definitive change vis-à-vis our union with Christ creates the possibility of real obedience.

Romans 6 also makes this ethical structure explicit. The first half of the chapter could be summarized according to verses 2 and 4b, that we should not continue in sin because we are people "raised to walk in newness of life." The walking in newness of life (which implies tangible acts of obedience) requires a prior resurrection. The resurrection actualizes real obedience. This resurrection is clearly that which we obtain in our union with Christ. Hence some definitive sense of resurrection—implying definitive sanctification—must undergird all historical obedience.

Further evidence of sanctification as a settled state prior to actual obedience is that we must consider ourselves to be in this state if we are to be holy. As Herman Ridderbos explains, a certain "self-judgment" is necessary if we are going to live within the logic of who we are in Christ.[20] Over and against the reality of sin, believers must look at themselves through what Christ has become for them and who they are in him so that they can live in a way that corresponds with who they are. John Webster explains this thought well: "The moral *movement* [that is, our acting morally] is imperfectly undertaken without apprehension of moral *nature*, without intelligence of who and where we are, and by whom we are met."[21]

Further, Paul commands us to present ourselves to God "as those alive from the dead" (v. 13). We must not miss the fact that a certain mode of offering of ourselves is required. We must offer ourselves cognizant of the fact that we are people alive from the dead. If we were to offer ourselves in a different way—for example, with a goal of meriting life—we would not obey this command. The commands require we consciously act *from* life, not *for* life. The life from which we act is the new life we have in Christ, and we must act on it as a settled (definitive) reality.

---

[19] For instance, it is significant that this passage that speaks of the radical transition from death to life situates that transition in the two-age construct.

[20] Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard de Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 203.

[21] John Webster, "'Where Christ Is': Christology and Ethics," in *Virtue and Intellect*, vol. 2 of *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2018), 14 (emphasis original).

We can summarize the relationship between definitive sanctification and ethics as "becoming who we already are in Christ."[22] Obedience does not create a situation that was in no way true of us prior to obedience. Obedience manifests our sanctified nature in Christ. However, for this phrase to communicate Paul's thought correctly, the words "in Christ" must carry immense weight. If we remove them, the sentence changes meaning:[23] it invites us to turn inward and try to become a better version of ourselves. However, "The farthest thing from the apostle's mind is the notion that this new life is to be explained on the basis of man himself."[24] We are truly (definitively) sanctified in the core of our identity, but only because the core of our identity is found in another, in Christ. Webster explains: "We really are, and we really are outside of ourselves."[25] *Becoming* what we are in Christ is nothing more than manifesting Christ's moral identity (an identity that we already inhabit) in our lives. The fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23) is the character of Christ, born in our lives through the Spirit of Christ by the gospel.

Definitive sanctification underscores the fact that our identity in Christ is a settled reality, which enables us to venture into the field of moral action with confidence.

What does all of this mean for preaching?

II. *Implications for Preaching*

The implications I have in mind do not primarily concern the content of the pastor's sermon, because that should be driven by the text. I care less about whether one sees definitive sanctification in any given text and more about the grid through which one understands the nature of the moral exhortation and the nature of the people he is called to exhort. I propose that definitive sanctification shapes or strengthens three overlapping principles for a theology of preaching.

1. *Preaching Christ Includes Preaching Moral Commands*

One legitimate concern with giving sustained attention to sanctification is that we become more interested in "How is your sanctification going

---

[22] Gaffin, "Romans" course lectures.

[23] See the fascinating interaction with this idea in Grant Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ: Paul's Gospel and Christian Moral Identity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 42. He cites a conversation with Julie Canlis, who commented that in many of the sentences that contain the phrase "in Christ," one could remove the phrase and the sentence would retain the exact same meaning.

[24] Ridderbos, *Paul*, 253.

[25] Webster, "'Where Christ Is,'" 23.

today?" than "Are you knowing Christ, who is your life?"[26] But there is also a legitimate concern that the attitude expressed by "just preach Christ" can omit the moral instruction that makes up so much of the New Testament. The solution is not so much a middle ground but a way of preaching Christ that includes the moral commands and a way of approaching the moral commands that only makes sense in light of the believer's definitive sanctification in Christ.

Paul makes this connection between Christ and moral exhortation explicit in Colossians 1:26–28:

> … the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

The phrase "him we proclaim" is often taken as a mandate for preaching, and rightly so. It is consistent with how Paul often summarizes the center of his exhortation:[27] "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you, except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2; see also 1 Cor 15:3–4, Gal 6:14, and 2 Tim 2:8). Christ—in his death and resurrection—is the foremost concern for Paul as he considers his role in advancing the gospel and edifying the church.[28] If the center of Paul's theology is Christ in his death and resurrection, our preaching should have that center as well.

But this center is not abstract and external; it is immensely personal, and this is where definitive sanctification comes into view. "Christ *in you*" is "the hope of glory" (Col 1:27). As we already noted, this implies that we share in Christ's sanctified nature. Thus, our preaching is not more "Christ-centered" when we preach Christ without reference to the manifold ways in which we benefit from him. Rather, the glory that Christ received "was not," as Calvin says, "for his own private use, but to enrich poor and needy men."[29] Thus, to preach Christ is to help people understand their identity in him;

---

[26] See Gerhard O. Forde, "The Lutheran View," in *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, ed. Donald L. Alexander (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1989), 14–32.

[27] I am making the significant assumption that Paul's theology does have a center (see Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight*, 23–49).

[28] Gaffin summarizes that "Christ, in His death and resurrection, is Paul's ultimate epistemic commitment" (Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "Some Epistemological Reflections on 1 Cor 2:6–16," *Westminster Theological Journal* 57.1 [Spring 1995]: 108).

[29] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, LCC 20 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:537 (3.1.1).

proclaiming Christ and teaching people the grounding reality of their sanctification are best done simultaneously.

Proclaiming Christ also includes specific moral instruction. Grammatically, "him we proclaim" is further explained by the activity of "warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ" (Col 1:28). Thus, "proclaiming Christ" includes—in Colossians at least—Paul's prayer for wisdom to walk worthy of the Lord and for strength to endure (1:9–11); his warnings to continue in the faith (1:23); the commands to "walk in him" (2:6), shun worldly philosophy (2:8–10), seek Christ, who is above (3:2), put away sinful behavior (3:5–11), and put on love (3:14); and all the specific moral commands of the household codes (3:18–4:1). Proclaiming Christ is not averse to moral instruction but bound up with it. This does not run aground on moralism *if* it is also kept in mind that there would be no possibility for moral instruction if it were not for "Christ in you" and that "the hope of glory" is a hope that purifies us (1 John 3:2–3) as we long to experience in full what we now know only in part.

2. *Preach the Indicative and Imperative Together*

Another danger arising from attention to sanctification is that we can inadvertently accelerate the pendulum swing between antinomianism and legalism. A sermon intending to confront hypocrites could unintentionally rob the overly sensitive of assurance. A sermon designed to ground our assurance in the gospel could provide shelter for those persisting in unrepentant sin. A strong moral exhortation could leave some people feeling smug and others distraught.

The doctrine of definitive sanctification slows the pendulum swing by underscoring the theological connection between the indicative and the imperative, which brings into view a corresponding homiletical connection. When we command the congregation to be holy, we must do so in such a way that it reinforces their identity as part of the new creation in Christ. It becomes much harder to move the pendulum when we understand how the commands and promises imply one another.

First, it is helpful to realize that the connection between the indicative and the imperative in Christian sanctification is symbiotic and overlapping, which is different from their connection in any other realm. All but the most extreme philosophical constructivists[30] would say that there is some

[30] I am thinking, for instance, of Michel Foucault, who sees that our identity is constructed as we confess who we are. See Christopher Watkin, *Michel Foucault*, Great Thinkers (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018).

sense in which the imperative flows from the indicative because there is some sense in which given reality obligates my moral choices; for example, because I am a father (indicative), I should love and nurture my children (imperative). In fact, Scripture routinely assumes that creation and providence dictate and empower certain moral obligations (1 Cor 7). But, in the realm of Christian sanctification, the real change in the believer's nature in Christ—the indicative—reveals more than merely my moral context or even my potential and trajectory. It defines who I really am in my deepest moral identity because I have received the moral nature of Christ in my union with him.[31]

This creates an interesting situation—one that has been wrongly described as the *problem* of the indicative and imperative. Ridderbos explains: "The new life in its moral manifestation is at one time proclaimed and posited as the fruit of the redemptive work of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit—the indicative; elsewhere, however, it is put with no less force as a categorical demand—the imperative."[32] That is to say, the indicative and imperative overlap. What is stated as true of us is also commanded to be true of us. This overlap is to be expected given the overlap of the two ages (see above).

We see this overlap in Scripture: the indicative includes the fact that I am already "dead to sin" and "alive to God" (Rom 6:11). I already am "unleavened" (1 Cor 5:7)—leaven here signifies moral corruption. I have already "put on Christ" (Gal 3:27); I have "put off the old man and put on the new" (Col 3:9–10).[33] And yet, I must "must put sin to death" and "not let sin reign in my body" (Rom 6:12). Because I am unleavened, I must "get rid of the old leaven" to become "a new batch of dough" (1 Cor 5:7). I must put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the lust of the flesh (Rom 13:14). I must "put off the old and put on the new" (Eph 4:22–24).[34]

The gospel of grace hinges upon the correct relationship between the indicative and the imperative. Though overlapping, the indicative comes first logically and gives rise to the imperative. God constitutes us to have a certain identity in Christ, and then we—conscious of that identity—manifest in our behavior who we already are. And yet obedience is still required. The priority of the indicative in no way makes the imperative superfluous. Rather, the indicative establishes the need for the imperative. Given that the indicative describes my truest moral nature—a nature that really is unleavened, that truly is dead to sin and alive to God, that is free, no longer under

---

[31] See Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ*.
[32] Ridderbos, *Paul*, 253.
[33] Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight*, 79–80.
[34] Ibid.

the rule of law and sin—I must manifest this reality in my life, however incomplete and unimpressive that manifestation might turn out to be. The indicative of definitive sanctification (that I *am* made new in Christ) must result in the imperative of progressive sanctification (I *must* live as a new person in Christ).

Thus, to separate the indicative from the imperative is to alter both. To present the indicative as a thing by itself is to present it as though it were not a real change in our nature that must manifest itself in a change of how we live. To present the imperative alone is to present it as though either it were simply a call to raw behavior change, a kind of "gutting it out in the flesh," or that true heart change and genuine love spring from ourselves without a renovative act of God.

How does this relate to preaching? I contend that we must connect the indicative and the imperative in the way that we talk about Christian identity and moral exhortation.

This is not to say that we need to give a full theology of sanctification every time we repeat a biblical promise or command. (One sure way to kill the drama of Scripture in our preaching is to give a systematic overview of every doctrine that impinges on the passage we are preaching.) But the uniqueness of the relationship in Scripture should sensitize us to the fact that the congregation might not be automatically processing the indicative and the imperative in this same way. They may be understanding the indicative and the imperative as functioning separately, which, as we said, alters the meaning of both.

For instance, a member of a church I consulted with once told me that the problem with the pastor's preaching was that he was not "legalistic enough," as evidenced by the large number of people living immoral lives around him. If he had preached more rules, the congregation would be living in a more holy way. This betrays the misconception that the way to encourage holiness is to preach the commands while the way to encourage confidence and assurance in Christ is to preach the gospel. But this does not work. A kind of exclusive focus on the gospel apart from the need for holiness misunderstands what the gospel is all about. Likewise, emphasis on rules to promote holiness will not succeed because that is not the kind of holiness God wants and because the law only increases sin. Walter Marshall rightly pointed out that the most insidious antinomian error is neonomianism (read legalism) because while a legalistic impulse can masquerade as a deep concern for holiness, in

actual practice it will only produce sin.[35] Only the biblical indicative can lead us to obey the biblical imperative.

However, it is not enough simply to teach people that they are connected; we must teach them how that connection will affect their lives. It is frightfully easy to verbally affirm all the right things about sanctification but in a moment of moral dilemma to act as though we are obeying to merit life (and become legalists) or as though no obedience is required (and become antinomians). In other words, keeping the indicative and imperative together is not just a verbal affirmation; it is also a skill that needs to be learned and honed.

Ridderbos pushes us to consider the lived experience of the indicative and imperative when he says that both are a matter of faith, "on the one hand [faith's] receptivity [that is, the indicative], on the other [faith's] activity [imperative]."[36] Faith, in Scripture, signifies a mode of living. We live by faith, walk by faith, and overcome the world by faith, and faith works through love. This mode contrasts with "by sight." Operating by faith means that we access the indicative not through our experience in the world but through Scripture's proclamation. The creation displays the glory of God, but it does not tell us that we are dead to sin and alive to God in Christ. Our own history does not even tell us this. It is actually over and against evidence to the contrary that I trust what Scripture says about me. And yet, such a self-judgment is precisely what I need to make if I am going to fight against sin rightly. This, we saw, was Paul's argument in Romans 6:1–14. I present myself to God as one who is alive from the dead, even if I do not feel that way. Thus, the indicative is a matter of faith, a matter of receiving the word of God as truth over and against my experience. The imperative is also a matter of faith, a matter of actively pursuing the kinds of actions that make sense given the reality that God says is true of us in Christ.

What is the process by which faith pivots from receptivity to activity? I contend that it involves skills that must be developed. The Reformed Orthodox were helpful when they said that theology is not simply a science—a kind of knowledge—but also an art. Marshall explains sanctification as "the rare and excellent *art* of godliness" at which he believes "every Christian should strive to be skillful and expert."[37] Our theology of sanctification must not only explain the theoretical relationship between the indicative and the imperative, but it must also address such practical issues such as these:

---

[35] Walter Marshall, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2013), 15, 219.

[36] Ridderbos, *Paul*, 256.

[37] Marshall, *Gospel Mystery*, 160.

- How do I stare into the blackness of my sin and yet still hold on to the reality that I am dead to sin and alive to God in Christ?
- How do I examine myself to see if I am in the faith without losing faith in what Scripture says of me?
- How do I know when I should doubt my salvation?
- What is the difference between serving in "the oldness of the letter" and "the newness of the Spirit"? What does that difference feel like? And how do I know when I am doing one and not the other?

These questions cannot be answered with recourse to propositional truth alone; they must also address lived experience and learned skills. Paul gets at something of this in 2 Corinthians 4. "We are struck down but not destroyed … always carrying around the dying of Jesus so that the life of Jesus is manifested in us" (vv. 9–10). Paul is describing *how* he lives within the reality of the already and the not-yet, that is, "by faith and not (yet) by sight."

Many of these skills for living refer people back to the means of grace, such as Bible reading, prayer, confession, and fellowship. Most congregations know that they need to be doing these things already. But there is a way to pray that builds from and reinforces our definitive identity in Christ, and there is a way to pray that acts as though we must build that on our own. There is a way to seek Christian fellowship as an overflow of who we are in Christ, and there is a way that wrongly grounds our identity in mere community. There is a way to confess and repent that flows from our life in Christ, and there is a way that reverts to salvation by law-keeping.

We must teach people how to live within the reality of both the indicative and the imperative and the already and the not-yet amid the warp and woof of life.

3. *Preach Holiness as Part of the Eschatological Renewal of All Things*

Some also fear that sustained attention to sanctification can orient us too much to this life and not enough to the life to come. If I spend too much effort trying to improve my life now, might I spend too little time longing for the life to come? Might sanctification become just a slightly baptized version of finding my "best life now"? The answer is no because sanctification is deeply eschatological.[38]

---

[38] For more on the connection to eschatology, see Michael Allen, *Grounded in Heaven: Recentering Christian Hope and Life on God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), especially 10–12.

Recall the passage in Colossians we explored above (Col 1:27). Paul not only connects his proclamation of Christ to the church's present union with Christ ("Christ in you"), he also does so with a view to the consummation of their union ("hope of glory"). Thus, to preach Christ is to preach the hope of the beatific vision: "When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" (Col 3:4). Moreover, sanctification and glorification are themselves connected, as Marshall captures so well: "Sanctification in Christ is glory begun as glorification is sanctification perfected."[39] Our present sanctification is nothing more than proleptically realized glorification. Living within "the Vosian box"—when the new age has dawned and the old has not yet passed away—is living in hope. "We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it."[40]

We could make an analogy. Just as we said that we really are sanctified because we really inhabit the identity of another, the resurrected Christ, so also, we are sanctified *now* because we are people who belong to the future. In other words, when we talk about our definitive sanctification in Christ, we are not really calling people to look back (back to the death of Christ and their conversion), but we are calling people to look to the future because our truest identity is who we are in Christ when he returns. When we say that our sanctification is, in part, a settled reality, we do not mean a de-eschatologized reality. We mean that it is settled because we are people "upon whom the end of the age has come" (1 Cor 10:11). Thus, the more clearly and concretely we understand that future reality, the more we will be able to act accordingly.

Here is one way this can manifest itself in preaching: Christians differ on this, but I see significant continuity between this world and the one to come. We will be raised in our physical bodies, speak to one another in human languages (I am intrigued by D. A. Carson's idea that we will come to learn these languages).[41] I believe that the "new creation" is not a wholly new creation, but this creation made new. In this new creation reality, I will worship God fully and purely. Our worship will not be ethereal, but we will have real physical bodies. I will interact with others without pretense or covertness. I will be among a people whom I enjoy for God's sake. We will enjoy creation for God's sake. We will do good works and serve one another. Our mode of living will be different: it will be by *sight*, no longer by faith. But the kinds of things that we are to aim toward will be the same.

---

[39] Ibid., 227.

[40] Luther, "Argument in Defense," 31.

[41] D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 74–75.

Preaching should seek to communicate a kind of sanctified imagination about this future glory. I do not mean any kind of "heaven tourism," which simply takes the values of this present world and projects them into the world to come. I mean the opposite: the values of the world to come projected back into the present. We need to preach often about heaven and connect the holiness we will have in heaven to our pursuit of it on earth.

Here is another example: After a sermon I preached on sexual sin, one young person—obviously struggling—asked, "Is there a time in our Christian journey and experience when we can say that we are free from sexual sin and temptation? If not, what will keep us from giving up in our pursuit of holiness?" I responded:

> Yes, absolutely … there is a time. It is when Jesus returns, and we see him face to face. I know that is not quite what you are asking, but I want to implore you to see that future encounter with Christ as part of your Christian journey and experience. In fact, I want you to see that as the definitive Christian experience that our experience now needs to be lived in light of. Let us bring our present experience into that future glory.

Conclusion

What we are talking about here is not a three-step approach for how to preach sanctifying sermons. Rather it is a call to be a student of the deep structure of the gospel and the classic works that explicate Scripture's teaching about the Christian life. It means serious engagement with biblical concepts with a goal of mapping them on to real life. In my experience, congregants love passages about definitive sanctification but understand little about them. Galatians 2:20 warms their hearts, but they cannot tell you what it means to no longer live but have Christ live in them. They like the truth that they are a new creation in Christ, but little content fills this category. I can also say from personal experience that pastors usually fare no better. However, a commitment to study and preach with definitive sanctification in view can help integrate the church's understanding of these passages into the broader tapestry of the gospel and implicate their experience in the reality of Christ and the glory to come.

If definitive sanctification is biblical, we must preach it because it is biblical, but we should not miss its cultural relevance. Definitive sanctification is another way of talking about human identity, which has been radically deconstructed by various postmodern ideologies in the West. Definitive sanctification grounds believers in a stable identity—because we really are united to Christ—while also recognizing that the fullness of that identity is

yet to be revealed. This allows us to see identity as both a solid platform from which we live and an ongoing project; such an identity is radically different from a modernist transparent identity or postmodern constructivist identity, both of which lead to contradiction and futility.[42] I wonder how the ongoing conversation about the legitimacy of a "gay Christian" could be different if we began the discussion with a robust understanding of definitive sanctification. I wonder how those who have suffered abuse could be helped by internalizing the reality that in Christ they are not only declared legally righteous, but their nature is also holy. I wonder how definitive sanctification could give more resources to those who are entrenched in a battle with sexual sin.

In essence, I am purposing that we use definitive sanctification as something of a grid for preaching, which means that we look not only at it but also through it. What emerges is a web of connections between the eschatological identity of people to whom we preach, the truth that they are called to believe, and the commands they must obey.

[42] I got this idea, in part, from a talk that Ted Turnau gave at the European Leadership Forum on postmodernism and identity.