

Response

by

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Andy Johnson raises an important question: Is the hermeneutical lens of “secondness” and “instantaneousness” the *only* faithful way for us to read New Testament texts that facilitates a context in which God can shape His people into a holy community? Although Johnson acknowledges that this specific language is absent in the NT, he does not question the validity and usefulness of these categories in describing what God is doing in the midst of His people.

He recognizes a decline in the use of such terms in the teaching and preaching in our Church. Few, if any, of us would question the “subsequent nature” of the experience we call entire sanctification in relation to justification. We find testimony in both the Old and the New Testaments that it is the people of God who are called to be holy as He who has redeemed them is Holy. The author of Hebrews urges believers to “leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity” (6:1, NIV), and chides them for being so slow to do so (5:11-14).

For many of us, the scriptural testimony has been confirmed in our personal experience in that, as young Christians, and without having heard holiness preached, we found ourselves hungering and yearning for a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ. Only a little more than one year after his “heart-warming” experience on Aldersgate Street, John Wesley distinguished between his teaching and that of the Church of England, “I believe justification to be wholly distinct from sanctification and necessarily antecedent to it” (Journal, Sept. 13, 1739, *Works* [Jackson edition], Vol. 1, p. 224).

The “instantaneous” aspect of entire sanctification may be more difficult to sustain from Scripture. Johnson suggests that particular social and cultural settings influence both the description of God’s work in the scriptural text and the church’s interpretation of Scripture based on its own experience within a given period. This is, without doubt, inevitable and necessary.

The discussion of this subject is not new; and certainly our concern goes well beyond any petty insistence upon particular exclusive terminology. The question Johnson raises is important, precisely because we are interested in the practical task of facilitating among those whom we serve the experiential reality of an encounter and ongoing dynamic relationship of total surrender and obedience to the Holy One.

Our distress comes from observation. We have witnessed the practical result of putting too great an emphasis upon the event of entire sanctification in its instantaneous and subsequent dimensions. The momentary experience too often becomes an end in itself and not the beginning of a new level of relationship with Jesus Christ that is dynamic and growing and works out in a life of increasingly Christlike character and power for service.

But it is dangerous to use exclusively another set of terms that emphasize the gradual and progressive aspects of sanctification to the neglect of the necessary moments of decision in response to God's grace and new light. Johnson suggests that the sanctification language used by the Apostle Paul in 1 Thessalonians has the purpose of continuing the "process" of bringing the converts from paganism "into a new and distinctively Christian pattern of behavior and practice."

Certainly, the reality of God's gracious work in us is greater than all our human language. The problem is our tendency to reductionism — well-intended efforts to describe the "how" and "when" of God's sanctifying work in us using easily understood terms. It is difficult to maintain the necessary tension of "both-and" realities, which include decisive life-changing moments in response to God's grace and the continuing and progressive work of God in His people.

Johnson suggests that the exclusive use of our particular language of sanctification arose in a certain historical and social situation in the past. Abandoning this familiar language in favor of another in the present may result in correcting the error of "exclusive" categories by replacing these in the typical "pendulum" fashion of theological discourse with just another set of "exclusive" categories.

I find it particularly helpful to understand all of salvation in terms of personal, intimate relationship with God and pilgrimage. There is plenty of biblical language in both Old and New Testaments to sustain these concepts. Using this biblical language may help us avoid static and limiting language.

John Wesley grappled with such questions in his context and time. His sermon "On Working Out Our Own Salvation," based on Philippians 2:12-13, maintains a particularly helpful dynamic balance between the instantaneous and the progressive aspects of salvation, avoiding closed and limiting categories. All of salvation is described in terms of a love relationship that begins with the initiative of God and requires a human response. Both occur at specific moments of decision and in an ongoing and ever-deepening life of submission and swift obedience to the whole will of God as it is understood at any particular moment.

He wrote, in part:

All experience, as well as Scripture, show this salvation to be both instantaneous and gradual. It begins the moment we are justified, in the holy, humble, gentle, patient love of God and man. It gradually increases from that moment, as "a grain of mustard-seed, which, at first, is the least of all seeds," but afterwards puts forth large branches, and becomes a great tree; till, in another instant, the heart is cleansed from all sin, and filled with pure love to God and man. But even that love increases more and more, till we "grow up in all things unto Him that is our Head" till we attain "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (*Works*, Vol. 6, p. 509).

May the Lord help us to learn to expand our vocabulary to describe the mighty works of God in Jesus Christ in our various contexts in ways that facilitate a growing Christlikeness among His people as individuals and as the Church.