Is Sanctification a Part of the Gospel for Which We Are ‘Together’?

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Introduction: In 1922 Karl Barth published a second edition of his famous commentary on the book of Romans and prefaced it with these words: “The attitude that I have adopted towards the text has been called ‘Biblicist.’ For this some have blamed and some have praised me. The word is not mine, but I accept it, provided I am allowed to explain what I mean by ‘Biblicism.’” I return to these words regularly because they epitomize to me what the postmodern mind has wrought in the realm of human language. Words have meaning today, it seems, only insofar as the individual chooses to define them.

Today, my concern is a word that is most precious to all of us and one that I trust will not by this conversation be diminished, but one, I think, that is not immune to adjustment at the hand of its individual users. The word, as you can see by the title of this presentation, is the word *Gospel*. We are in the middle, these days, of a surge toward unity around the *Gospel*. I’m not opposed to this, of course, but I have to offer a caveat not unlike Barth’s. I’m all for unity around the *Gospel* provided I am allowed to explain what I mean by *Gospel*.

It’s not that “Gospel” is a difficult word to define. Indeed, it has been the stuff of creeds from the earliest days of the Christian church. Most agree that 1 Corinthians 15:3–4 was, in fact, an early example of a Gospel creed of the first-century Church that was likely recited weekly by congregants in a several if not many local churches: “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, he was buried, he was raised on the third day, and he appeared to witnesses.” At the very simplest level, this is the irreducible minimum of the Gospel. But is this brief creed sufficient to every possible form of unity treasured by believers? No. Here’s why:

- Because these verses make certain assumptions that may not be shared by all who assert this creed. And so we press further to ask “Who is this ‘Christ’?” and “What is sin?” and “Why did he have to die?” and “In what sense is his death ‘for’ anyone?” and finally, “What are these ‘Scriptures’ to which Paul appeals twice?” Which is to say we require at least some agreement on aspects of bibliology, Christology, hamartiology, divine justice, and the nature of the atonement as fundamental to the apprehension of the Gospel proper.

- And even if we achieve agreement on the *Gospel proper* (as contained in these verses) AND on the *necessary assumptions* about the Gospel (anticipated by these verses), we still might balk at unity if there is not at least some agreement on the *necessary implications* of the Gospel. For instance, we are explicitly told in this very letter to disunite from those who profess this Gospel but persist in unrepentant immorality. We are further told in this very letter to disunite from those who profess this Gospel but persist in incompatible theological errors such as syncretism or licentiousness. And that is because persistence in these serious errors betrays capital misunderstandings of the Gospel that their proponents ostensibly embrace.

- Still further, even if we achieve agreement on the *Gospel proper* (as contained in these verses) AND on the *necessary assumptions* about the Gospel (anticipated by these
verses), and on the necessary implications of the Gospel (as developed throughout this very epistle), we still do not have enough to keep us “together” for just anything at all. These give us, yes, a minimum standard for clasping arms and fervently calling each other “brother” at Christian rallies in Louisville or for the academic types, at the annual meetings of the Evangelical Theological Society (and I have no intention of denigrating these), but I also recognize that these do not of themselves constitute a sufficient standard of fellowship for local church ordination, administration, communion, or mission. Which is why, until recently, churches tended to cluster around comprehensive bases of unity such as creeds, confessions, and denominational standards. I’m still convinced that this is a far more useful arrangement than the evangelical collective can ever offer us.

So, having said all of this, we ask where the issue of sanctification fits in. And it would appear that it falls into the category of implications of the Gospel. And so the specific question that this presentation seeks to answer is whether a correct view of sanctification is in any sense a necessary implication of the Gospel. Or perhaps better, but negatively, “Is it possible that one’s view of sanctification could be so egregiously wrong that it constitutes a fundamental denial or catastrophic betrayal of the Gospel itself?”

And my answer (which constitutes my thesis) is that “Yes, one’s view of sanctification can be so egregiously wrong that it constitutes a betrayal of the Gospel itself, though not every error concerning sanctification falls into this category.”

In demonstration of this thesis I’d like to analyze up two major problems, polar problems, or ditches, if you will, in the matter of relating the Gospel to sanctification. These two ditches are, to use popular terms, legalism and libertinism, respectively, and extreme versions on both edges of the sanctification debate earn extreme censure in the Christian Scriptures. Let’s look at these two classes of errors in turn:

**First, let’s look at the Legalist Error.** Legalism, of course, has a great plethora of definitions depending on whom one talks to, but what I mean when I use it in this presentation is the idea that one’s progress in sanctification contributes in some sense to one’s righteous standing before God. One may define the term differently, of course, but in the interest of being on the same page, this is the definition controlling its use in this presentation today. And since we are attempting in this presentation to discover if there is a thick black line in the sanctification debate that jeopardizes the Gospel, I’d like to start with a very egregious example of the legalist error about which we can all agree: Roman Catholicism. Apart, perhaps, from Pharisaic Judaism, Romanism stands today as the most stark representative of the legalist error, and certainly the most pervasive one in the history of the Christian Church. Note the following visual detail of the Romanist view of sanctification:
In the Roman Catholic Model, sanctification and justification are basically blended together as a progressive experience of the believer. One begins his faith journey with a preliminary justification by grace that transforms a person and makes him capable of “works of the Spirit” or sanctification. If one persists in these works, then he/she can earn a final justification that is based upon those good works.

Now as we look at the Romanist position, we take away some very interesting observations, and some of them relatively positive. Ultimately, however, their errors concerning sanctification upend the Gospel and turn it on its head. Note the following:

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<tr>
<th>What They Get Right</th>
<th>What They Get Wrong</th>
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<td>Since it is impossible for a natural man to please God on his own, God must act first to by grace start the salvation process. Justification is “by grace” (Rom 8:7).</td>
<td>Justification is “by grace,” but is not by grace alone (contra Rom 11:6; Heb 10:10). Justification starts with Christ, but is completed by the believer.</td>
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<td>Works “of the Law” cannot contribute to one’s justification (Gal 2:16).</td>
<td>Works “of the Spirit” can contribute to one’s justification (contra Rom 4:1–8).</td>
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<td>Justification is integrally connected with the believer’s accumulation of righteousness (Rom 1:16–17).</td>
<td>Justification does not involve righteousness that is imputed to the believer in all of its perfection by Christ, but rather a “seed” that God infuses into the believer and expects that believer to perfect (contra Rom 5:12–19).</td>
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<td>The process of life transformation (sanctification) begins when a believer is justified, and is a vital response of all truly justified people (Heb 12:14).</td>
<td>The process of life transformation is not only a vital response of all truly justified people but is also something necessary for believers to stay justified or, better, to complete their justification (contra Rom 5:1).</td>
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So in Romanism we have, I think, a model of sanctification that clearly jeopardizes the Gospel. Anyone who holds to this model of sanctification is not someone with whom we may be “together for the Gospel.” Now, this is the far pole; the extreme expression. None of the major players at T4G or TGC or the like would disagree. Roman Catholics are not “together” with the evangelicals at these venues. But there are several close Protestant approximations to Romanism that, in the interest of battling antinomianism, have come very, very close to embracing the Romanist error.

- **Norman Shepherd**, for instance, flirted with the Romish position as a faculty member at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia during the late 1970s, and split that institution something awful. Today his view is still propounded and growing under the headings of the *Auburn Avenue Theology* and the *Federal Vision Movement*. Major proponents and sympathizers here include Doug Wilson (popular apologist and classical education guru), Andrew Sandlin and James Jordan (both major players in the defense of YEC and well received in our circles), John Armstrong (popular author and lecturer at Wheaton), and other household names.

- Likewise, the *New Perspective on Paul* has made enormous inroads into the evangelical community through the writings of N. T. Wright, James D. G. Dunn, Don Garlington, Peter Leithart, and other figures held in high regard by the evangelical community.
• And lest we be guilty of ever looking only to our left but never to our right for errors, I would be remiss to neglect extreme versions of fundamentalism whose approach to sanctification as a crippling and arbitrary list of do’s and don’ts sometimes leaves one doubting whether proponents really understand the nature of biblical justification and the believer’s standing or acceptance before God.

All of these errors teeter on the edge of orthodoxy, teaching that specific works of sanctification are in some sense necessary to being right with God, but ever evasive as to the exact sense this is true. And they mingle with those who are “together for the gospel,” often with little censure, or censure that is short of denunciation. This is a problem.

It is possible, however, for the error on the other ditch of the road to be just as serious. And so we move now to the second problem, that of Libertinism or Antinomianism. The problem of libertinism is often regarded as something of a lesser concern because its proponents are perceived to have gotten the doctrine of justification right: those who practice libertinism are saved, just misguided. They have committed, it is argued, a post-conversion error, and so this cannot possibly be treated as a Gospel issue.

Critics often point to Lutheranism as the genesis of modern theological antinomianism. Lutheranism was, of course the earliest of the three branches of the Reformation, and, as is typical in such situations, swung away from Romanism, if this is possible, too far. What I mean by this is that the Lutheran model so resisted good works as a means of justification that some of its proponents actually began to eschew good works entirely as antithetical to the Gospel. And Lutheranism began to develop a reputation for licentiousness. Partly as a response to this, early Lutherans began to press for a threefold use of the law:

1. To curb general, civil violence
2. To show men their inability to keep the law and point them to Christ, who could and did.
3. To guide believers as a way of life.

The third use of the law stabilized the Lutheran model, but it should be noted that not all Lutherans accepted it, and those who did often treated it as a pointer to the second use of the law—a constant reminder that perfect obedience is impossible together with the consolation that it doesn’t matter, because Christ did it all.

The next major iteration of this models came in the mid-nineteenth century in the error of Keswick Theology that emerged from the Revivalist Methods of Asa Mahan and Charles Finney. Those who adopted this view regarded the doctrine of sanctification as one that is temporally subsequent to justification, and usually separated from justification by a substantial gap of time. It was argued by most proponents, in fact, that substantive commencement of a believer’s sanctification did not really occur until it was facilitated by a second act of faith—a baptism of the Spirit or act of consecration/surrender/dedication, where the believer would stop “striving” and start “resting” or “reckoning” on his position in Christ: he had to “Let Go and Let God”:
Now, it should be noted that Finneyism and Keswick Theology did not promote libertinism in any sense. This would be a slanderous proposal. Still, both models taught that it was possible to be in possession of justification for a long time without any practical evidence that one has been saved. A very serious line was crossed, however, by several later proponents (most famously the late Zane Hodges), who argued that one might be justified and never grow in grace, and could even apostatize and remain assured of heaven. Note the following amended diagram:

![Diagram showing Justification by Faith Alone optionally leading to Sanctification by Faith Alone.]

To put things in theological terms, this radical model teaches that the grace of justification can be so radically divorced from the grace of sanctification (and effectively, I would argue, from the very grace of regeneration), that perseverance becomes entirely unnecessary. I hope all here will agree with me that this last version of sanctification seriously jeopardizes the Gospel, and, as a result should impel us to break ranks from those who hold it.

Recently we have seen a new species of this general class of sanctification models emerging, perhaps a bit surprisingly, from Reformed evangelical life in the popular writings of Tullian Tchividjian, Elyse Fitzpatrick, Steve Brown, and others. It’s hard to know exactly where this came from. It’s hard to discover any direct Keswick influence, and certainly none of the dispensational/fundamentalist influence we cited above, so some have cited Lutheran influences. It appears to me that, as much as anything, Tchividjian is reacting to what he perceives to be legalism or Pharisaism that he has encountered in conservative corners of his own Presbyterian denomination. Whatever one concludes about the impetus for this new expression, the result has been a model that bears considerable resemblance to (though not identity with) the Keswick model. The idea of a commencement point (a crisis moment of surrender/consecration) is not so pronounced in Tchividjian’s model, but the general means of sanctification is the same. After a period (sometimes an extended period) of struggling and working to keep God’s rules, the believer realizes that growing in grace has little or nothing to do with what I do, but rather with a regular reflection on what Christ has done (a phrase that appears several times in Tchividjian’s book *Jesus + Nothing = Everything*). God does have rules for us, to be sure, but the primary function of these rules is to remind us that we can’t obey them, and thus to point us to Christ who can and did obey them. The believer grows by “preaching the Gospel to oneself,” a phrase only slightly removed from the old Keswick idea of “reckoning on one’s position in Christ.” So to adjust the diagram further to account for these new advances:

![Diagram showing Justification by Faith Alone leading to Sanctification by Faith “Reckoning” or Preaching the Gospel to Oneself.]

The nature of the antinomian error is more complex than the legalist error, and like that error, there are shades and degrees of the antinomian error that are catastrophic to the Gospel (Hodges).
and others that merely bruise it (Keswick/Tchividjianism). But I don’t think we can get away from describing this as a “Gospel issue.” Let me explain by appealing to Romans 6:1–14. Paul is just finishing a two-chapter-long essay on justification, in which he pounded hard the fact that justification is all of grace, all of Christ, and most emphatically not of works. And as he reflected on these emphases he is compelled to address the possibility that his readers might so fixate on the glories of justification that they might reduce the Gospel to nothing more than the doctrine of justification. I would contend that this is an epidemic problem in conservative evangelicalism today: Gospel = justification. And while I appreciate the clarification of justification, I fear that it has occurred at the expense of the doctrines of regeneration and sanctification, which are also essential parts of the Gospel. It is not enough to say, “I understand justification,” and conclude therefrom that “I understand the Gospel.” Let’s look at Paul’s remedy to this ancient but recurring problem:

1 What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

2 If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.

3 Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.

4 In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.

Paul here is addressing an imaginary interlocutor here, one who, after reading Paul’s treatment of the doctrine of justification in Romans 4–5, erroneously concludes, “Let us continue in sin so that grace may abound!” Or, “If God is glorified when he saves wicked sinners, let’s bring him even more glory by being even more wicked.” This is antinomianism in its most extreme expression. And it derives, incidentally, from fixating too exclusively on justification in one’s understanding of the Gospel. So Paul explodes, “GOD FORBID!” then opens up his discussion on part two of the Gospel: the doctrine of regeneration.

(1) First, Paul explains, the Gospel cannot be reduced to a legal transaction. The Gospel surely includes the great legal exchange of his robes for mine, but it is cannot be limited to this. Rather, Paul says, something experiential happened too: we “died to sin” so that we might “live for God,” an idea beautifully depicted in the rite of baptism. Elsewhere Paul speaks of being a new creation, such that the old is gone and the new has come. This is, theologically speaking, Paul’s explanation of the doctrine of regeneration. And his argument here is that regeneration always accompanies justification and must accompany justification: “God forbid” that we claim one without the other.

(2) Paul then goes on to explain what this experience looks like. Regeneration entails a twofold idea: something dies and something springs to life. Specifically, he says, the state
of total depravity ends: we are no longer *slaves to sin*. Instead, we have been re-created as *instruments of righteousness*. These are eminently practical terms. We no longer engage endlessly in law-breaking, but are able to live righteously, a term which has everything to do with upholding God’s righteous standards and obeying his rules.

(3) Finally, Paul describes the response of the believer: Don’t act like and unbeliever. Resist the tyrannical tug of wickedness. Self-consciously commit to righteous living. And expanding from this passage, the Scriptures add:

- Put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. You *used to* walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. And clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity (Col 3:5–14).

- [Since you have] participated in the divine nature and escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires, for this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love…. For if one does not have these things, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins. Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For by doing these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Pet 1:4–11).

You must apply diligence, lay aside obstacles to obedience, work out your salvation in fear and trembling, and press toward the goal of God’s upward call. In short, a new life is a necessary accoutrement of our new standing, and the absence of the former is evidence of an absence of the latter: It’s a Gospel issue. If you think you can have justification without sanctification, then you never got justification, Paul says in clear and emphatic terms. Note the following diagram detailing the place of sanctification in a biblically complete Gospel:
**Conclusion:** Briefly, the suggestion made in this presentation is twofold: (1) justification and regeneration (with its resulting outworking in sanctification) must always be joined in a biblically robust understanding of the Gospel. Anything less is not the Gospel. But (2) neither can the two be commingled without destroying the essential character of the Gospel. Failure in either of these areas constitutes an obfuscation of the Gospel, and necessarily inhibits Christian unity.

That being said, we must recognize that not every shade of these two errors amounts to Gospel denial. We have dealt with the extreme expressions of the two errors (Romanist legalism and principled libertinism), but must recognize lesser errors that fall short of catastrophic error. I am not prepared, for instance, to write off as apostates all Keswick advocates, Lutherans, and the good folks in the PCA who have been mesmerized by Tchividjianism. Some of these have surely bruised the Gospel, but they have not all denied it. With that in mind, my narrow conclusion is this: *Gospel unity is compromised when professing believers affirm that the believer's good works add materially to the finished work of Christ as a means of justification OR when professing believers actively deny that regeneration and/or perseverance in faith and obedience are requisite features of the Christian Gospel.*