

STATEMENT ON SANCTIFICATION

by Great Lakes Conference *Theologian in Residence* Matthew R. Peterson

Introduction

It is from our Wesleyan predecessors that the Brethren in Christ inherited a rich understanding of *holiness* and *sanctification* in the life of the church. However, in recent years there has been a growing concern that our wider church family is losing its attachment to traditional views and values that marked our theological heritage.¹ The work of “reaffirming our identity” has become a central part of the Brethren in Christ’s *Project 250* commitment² as well as other focuses in our denomination. This work is all the more important in light of wider struggles in American evangelicalism that impact our denominational family.

Ours is an age in which evangelical Christianity in America is increasingly framed along political lines rather than theological ones. In this politically polarized time, there is a strong tendency to elevate political party alignments over a commitment to the teachings of Jesus. The effect of this trend has been an increase in self-identifying Christians whose attitudes and actions are characterized by vindictiveness and hatred of “others,” especially foreigners and the poor. We have also witnessed Christian language and imagery exploited in situations of extreme violence, including the January 6th, 2021, insurrection at which Christian flags and “Jesus Saves” signs appeared alongside rioting and chants to hang the Vice President.

This distressing situation has many explanations, one of which is that many Christians lack firm rooting in a genuine theological worldview. Such is certainly the case when it comes to the idea of *sanctification*. Christians of many stripes are familiar with the phrase from the Scriptures “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” But many of us are less certain of what it means to “be holy,” and our uncertainty can make us vulnerable to wrongful teaching that in turn produces wrongful actions. This resource is designed to introduce you and your congregation to a Brethren in Christ perspective on *sanctification*. In it we will explore three major themes:

1. *Sanctification means to be set apart for God.*
2. *Sanctification is becoming what God has made us.*
3. *Sanctification is ultimately not what we do, but what God has done in us.*³

My hope is that this resource, coupled with others produced by the Brethren in Christ U.S., will promote reflection and conversations about just what it means to be a holy/sanctified people, and how that vision for the church can be a positive witness in our divided times.

¹ Lisa Weaver-Swartz, “A Giant Bag of Core Values: Findings from the 2021 Brethren in Christ Pastoral Identity Portraits Project” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 45.2 (August 2022): pages 260-298; Zach Spidel, “From Practice to Methods: Evangelical Utilitarian Ecclesiology and the Mid-Century Transformation of the Brethren in Christ” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 45.3 (December 2022): pages 325-354.

² For more information on Project 250, visit: <https://bicus.org/project-250>

³ The language of these three points has been taken from the Brethren in Christ U.S. publication *Accents & Issues: Sanctification*, page 1. A copy of that document is attached at the end of this resource.

1. Sanctification means to be set apart for God

You were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.
(Revelation 5:9–10)

God's call for our *sanctification* begins with a *claim* that he has upon those who follow Jesus. We have been purchased at the cost of Jesus's own life and with a particular purpose in mind: to become "*a kingdom and priests to serve our God.*" The ideas of kingdom and priesthood go very far back in the Scriptures. This was the identity given to the people of Israel after God delivered them from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 19:4-6). This identity is reaffirmed for the people of God (Jew and Gentile) who choose to follow Jesus (1 Peter 2:9). Through his death and resurrection, we have become a part of God's special possession – "*a people for his name ... that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name*" (Acts 15:14–17).

As God's people, we are "set apart" through his redemptive work in Jesus Christ. This has been done not so that we can claim membership in some exclusive club, or brag about God's choice of us over others. In fact, the call to be a "kingdom and priests" people is fundamentally a call to service – service of God through obedience to his commands, and service of others by representing God to them and offering his reconciliation found in Christ. To be "set apart" is not simply to be set apart *from* others, but rather to be set apart *for* God, for his church, and for the wider human family. In this way we participate in the promise given to Abraham, "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3).

Sanctification brings to our theological worldview the idea that God equips his people for *transformation*. This is in contrast to the tendency of some churches to pursue *converts* rather than form *disciples*. Such a mindset is what theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer once called "cheap grace" – the idea that God provides forgiveness but neither demands nor equips his people for costly discipleship. As in Bonhoeffer's day, the fruit of such teaching is churches and church members who claim Jesus's forgiveness while participating in and promoting systems of violence, war-making, and hatred-of-others. But God's call for his people has always been that they become a different, "set apart" people, whose lives are transformed. His work of salvation is indeed an unmerited gift, but the scope of that salvation includes our transformation into greater likeness of his own holy image.

Although we are still works in progress, we ought not look exactly like the world around us, only with a sprinkling of Jesus on the side. Nor are we to be so wholly "set apart" that the world is unaware of our existence. God's intended distinctness for his people is a means by which he desires to draw others to himself. A holy people, committed to the teachings of Jesus, and exhibiting supernatural love for others, is a part of his strategy to rescue the nations. As the Lord says, "*let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven*" (Matthew 5:16).

2. Sanctification is becoming what God has made us

To God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood.
(1 Peter 1:1–2).

These words from the apostle Peter were written to Christians who were shunned from their home communities as a result of their commitment to Jesus. They were “exiles” in their own countries, and like the exiled people of God of an earlier era, they were called to “*seek the peace and prosperity of the city*” (Jeremiah 29:7). Peace and prosperity could be found through living in a manner that turned their communities to God himself (1 Peter 2:11–13). This work was no accident, but a part of God’s plan for humanity from the very beginning of time. We know this because of the opening words of this letter, which ground the experience of sanctification in the foreknowledge of God.

In some church traditions the idea of “foreknowledge” quickly conjures up images of God selecting individuals for salvation before time. But in these verses we see that God’s foreknowledge is attached to his plan for the sort of humanity he is creating among those who are “in Christ.” His plan, and his election, is that *through the sanctifying work of the Spirit* we should become *obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood*. In other words, God has always intended for his people to become fully obedient to the teachings of Jesus and in so doing, to be made holy. Holiness is not a nice bonus on top of the experience of salvation – it is a part of what it means to be the redeemed people of God. “Our sanctification was God’s plan from the beginning.”⁴ His *goal* is a people who wholeheartedly follow Jesus. The *means* by which God accomplishes this goal is *through the sanctifying work of the Spirit*.

What sanctification looks like is spelled out a bit further in the letter. Peter reminds his audience that they are called to be “obedient children” and therefore should avoid evil desires. Instead, they should “be holy” because God himself is holy (1 Peter 1:14–15). Peter stresses that following God’s example of holiness is a process of purification tied to a posture of obedience (1 Peter 1:22). In strongly Wesleyan phrasing, the Brethren in Christ reiterate this connection between holiness and obedience:

“When we accept the grace that God provides, sanctification becomes real in us. There are two scriptural conditions: He will “give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:13) and “to those who obey him” (Acts 5:32). Praying and obeying, walking in the light as he is in the light (1 John 1:7), and purifying and consecrating our lives before God are the ways to realize the sanctifying presence of the Holy Spirit.”⁵

Continuing commitment to a life of obedience yields a refinement of our heart’s motives, so that we become more like Christ: “As the Spirit works in the life of the believer, he or she is led

⁴ *Accents & Issues: Sanctification*, page 1.

⁵ *Accents & Issues: Sanctification*, page 2.

forward in sanctification to a full surrender and commitment of the motives and will to Christ. This results in freedom from the control of sin and in empowerment to live the holy life.”⁶ Genuine victory over sinful inclinations is possible.

Importantly, sanctification results not only in the avoidance of clear sins, but also in a deep, practically expressed love for God’s people. *“Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart”* (1 Peter 1:22). In Wesleyan terms, this is what it means to have “perfected love” – a heart posture that is pure in intention, obedient in commitment, and grounded in Christian love for those in whose company the work of discipleship is carried out.

“As you come to him, the living Stone, ... you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”
(1 Peter 2:4–5)

Why all this fuss about obedience and holiness? A bit later in his letter Peter gives us an answer, but in a way that might be easily overlooked. Our sanctification, planned by the Father, carried out by the Spirit’s power, for obedience to Jesus Christ, is about us becoming a “temple people” for the triune God. The words “spiritual house” in this verse are particularly important. In Greek, the equivalent term for house is used in several contexts to refer to a temple.⁷ References to the *holy priesthood* and *spiritual sacrifices* make it clear that the temple should be in the back of our minds when reading this verse. In fact, temple imagery goes back earlier in the letter, with Peter’s words at the start of his letter that we should be *sprinkled with his blood* (1 Peter 1:2).⁸ Our sanctification – our growth in holiness through partnering of our obedience with the Spirit’s power – is the lived experience of becoming God’s temple people.⁹ It is an integral part to the church becoming God’s supernatural dwelling place on the earth. On some Sundays at our church, we sing a song called ‘Sanctuary’.¹⁰ The chorus has some words that are particularly relevant to this discussion:

*Lord prepare me to be a sanctuary Pure and holy, tried and true
With thanksgiving, I’ll be a living Sanctuary for You*

Sanctification is the Lord’s preparation of us as a people to more fully become what he desires us to be: a sanctuary in and with whom God in all his fullness he can dwell.

⁶ Brethren in Christ U.S., *Manual of Doctrine & Government* (2022), page 10.

⁷ On the use of “house” for the Temple: Matthew 21:13; Luke 11:51; John 2:16; Acts 7:47–49; Hebrews 10:21; etc.

⁸ In ancient times, sprinkling with blood was an act carried out for the cleansing of sin so as to ensure that God would continue to be present with his people and that the Temple would continue as a holy place.

⁹ *“Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God”* (Revelation 21:3).

¹⁰ ‘Sanctuary’ by Randy Scruggs and John Thompson.

https://hymnary.org/text/lord_prepare_me_to_be_a_sanctuary

3. Sanctification is ultimately not what we do, but what God has done in us

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.
(2 Corinthians 3:18).

The work of sanctification is not ours alone. Our sincere desire to live in obedience to Jesus Christ is empowered by God himself through the sanctifying work of the Spirit. This is because God's desire is our transformation into his own image – a holy people following a holy God. Paul describes this transformation by retelling the story of Moses, whose face shone brightly whenever he encountered God's glory on Sinai. We encounter God's glory, not on mountaintops surrounded by smoke and fire, but in the person of Jesus Christ. As we contemplate Jesus in prayer, Scripture reading, church fellowship, and service to others, we experience his glory. And through these experiences we are transformed further into his image.

Such is far different from the effort-based approach of self-help and pop psychology books. Sanctification of our hearts and motives is ultimately the result of God working in and through us to become who we are destined to be "in Christ." Of course, this does not mean that we play no role in the process. We must prepare our hearts and commit ourselves to obedience, which God cannot force us to do. But God will supply the means by which our commitments lead to genuine transformation via his Holy Spirit.

Throughout the history of the church, including that of the Brethren in Christ, there have been some efforts to declare a single set of experiences as the total explanation of what sanctification looks like.¹¹ But sanctification is not a human action that can be replicated by following a pre-determined pattern. Making sanctification into an experience that manifests in one particular way is to deny that it is fundamentally the work of God, carried out in diverse ways and among diverse people. The Spirit is at work throughout his church. Some individuals experience intense moments of immediate growth accompanied by genuine victory over sin. Others experience gradual daily victory. Both groups are brought into greater conformity with the image of God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. How this unfolds may look different from person to person, but God has promised to respond to open and obedient hearts by providing the Spirit for transformation and renewal.

¹¹ Some supporters of the "second work of grace" view teach that the experience of the Holy Spirit after conversion involves specific experiences. In some Pentecostal circles, for example, people are taught that a legitimate in-filling with the Spirit *will* be accompanied by speaking in tongues. Other circles do not require that action but stress that a definitive encounter with the Spirit involves other actions, feelings, or experiences. Each of these approaches starts with the right idea: the Spirit *changes* people. But where the impulse to label "second work" moments goes wrong is in proposing a "one size fits all" summary of that experience. 1 Corinthians 12–13 teaches that the same Spirit manifests his presence among the people of God in diverse ways, but that each of those diverse ways exists for the purpose of building up his people in love for God and for each other. I suspect that we can apply this teaching by analogy to sanctifying moments: within the church the Spirit will manifest his sanctifying presence in diverse ways, but always for the same purpose of equipping his people for service.

Conclusion

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.
(1 Peter 2:9)

As we have seen, sanctification is the God-led, Spirit-empowered process by which we become who we are meant to be: a people set apart for God to dwell among. These words from Peter summarize the call to holiness well. God's people have come from different families, different social backgrounds, and even different countries. But in Christ we have become "*a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession.*" This status has been freely granted, but it has been granted to us with a specific goal in mind: the praise of God and the redemption of the world. Through sanctification, we draw closer and closer to this divine vision, and in so doing praise him with our worship, our work, and our love for others.

Brethren in Christ U.S. Resources

- Brethren in Christ U.S., *Articles of Faith & Doctrine: "Life in the Spirit"*. Available at: <https://bicus.org/about/what-we-believe/articles-of-faith-and-doctrine/the-holy-spirit-and-the-church>
- Brethren in Christ U.S., *Accents & Issues: "God's Call to Holy Living"*. Available at: <https://bicus.org/about/what-we-believe/positions>
- Brethren in Christ U.S., *Accents & Issues: "Sanctification"*. Available at: <https://bicus.org/about/what-we-believe/positions>

Other Articles & Resources

- Luke L. Keefer Jr., "Getting at Essential Issues in Sanctification" *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 6.2 (December 1983): 168–209.
- Luke L. Keefer Jr., "The Purpose of Holiness: The Triumph of God's Will" *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 26.3 (December 2003): 310–321.
- Matthew R. Peterson, "Three Streams: The Brethren in Christ U.S. Theological Heritage (Part Three – Wesleyanism)".



Accents & Issues

Sanctification

Sanctification means *to be set apart for God*. In salvation, we were made holy. Sanctification is becoming what God has made us. Although we devote ourselves to the work of God's Kingdom, sanctification is ultimately not what we do, but what God has done in us.

Two basic and interrelated ideas are contained in this definition of sanctification. One is consecration: Christians are considered to be God's property, purchased at the price of Jesus' blood (1 Cor. 6:20). The other concept related to sanctification is purity. Because God is holy, we are to be holy as well (1 Pet. 1:15-16).

Yet, we are always a work in progress. We want to do good, but evil is close by (Rom. 7:21). Nevertheless, Christians no longer live in sin as they did formerly. Both the outward conduct and the inner motives are transformed by the grace of God, who promises to empower us for purity of heart and life (2 Cor. 6:16-7:1; 1 Thess. 5:23-24; 2 Pet. 1:3-4).

God's Will

Humans were created to fellowship with and faithfully serve God. Yet, when Adam and Eve sinned, the human race lost its original righteousness. Since then, all people were born with original sin and became guilty of sinful practices.

Yet, in great mercy and love, God chose not to abandon us to our just fate. Instead, God sent Jesus, his only Son, to redeem human beings from the cause and the consequences of sin. His death on the cross provided forgiveness for committed sins and cleansing from the perverse bent toward sinning. Subsequently, the resurrection of Jesus from death canceled the penalty of death and granted the gift of eternal life. Our sanctification was God's plan from the beginning.

Jesus' Sanctifying Death

Jesus became human to redeem fallen creation. First, he demonstrated that it was possible to be fully human and live without sin. What was possible for Jesus is an ideal for humanity. Second, at the cross, the sinless Jesus took upon himself the whole burden of human sin — its penalty, its defilement, and its power (2 Cor. 5:21). Through his atonement the consequences of sin were set aside. Third, his victorious resurrection made possible a completely new way of life. Finally, in his gift of the Holy Spirit, Christ put at our disposal all the power for godly living that he himself knew. For the law of the spirit in Christ Jesus frees us from the law of sin and death (Rom. 8:1-2). Christ's atoning death on the cross and his victory over death through the resurrection completes the sanctification of his people (Heb. 10:10). Jesus becomes to the believer "wisdom ... righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30).

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus did more than remove the symptoms of sin. The power of Jesus' resurrection destroyed the very root of sin, making holy living possible. As we abide in the risen Christ, we bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit (John 15:1-11). Ultimately, God intends to have his followers stand before him in perfect holiness of both soul and body, without defect and without blame. The culmination of the process of sanctification is glorification when our holiness is perfected in the presence of God.

The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit makes us what God wills us to be and what Jesus makes possible for us to be. This happens through both process and crisis. The Christian follows the light provided by the Spirit to progressively mature in

holiness. Yet, there are times when the Holy Spirit allows the believer to experience a heavenly moment, which empowers a new level of holiness beyond normal maturity. Sanctification comes through natural spiritual growth and supernatural infilling by the Holy Spirit.

In both, the Holy Spirit is the active agent of sanctification (Rom. 15:16; 2 Thess. 2:13; 1 Pet. 1:2). By the Holy Spirit, believers not only become aware of sin but also find the power of God available to conquer it (Rom. 8:13). The Spirit changes us into the very image of God (2 Cor. 3:17-18), produces the fruit of the Spirit in us (Gal. 5:22-26), and equips us with gifts to minister effectively (1 Cor. 12).

The Spirit moves us to consecrate ourselves to God's will and his work (Rom. 12:1-2). He gives wings to our prayers (Rom. 8:26-27; Jude 20-21), voice to our witness (John 15:26-27; Acts 1:8), and heart to our worship (Acts 2:43-47; Eph. 5:18-20). This is what the Scripture means when it commands us to live in the Holy Spirit.

The Role of Christians

Christians pursue holiness with single-minded diligence (Heb. 12:14; 2 Pet. 1:5-11). Although sanctification comes through the truth of God's Word (John 17:17), we place ourselves under the influence of the Word. We side with God against all sin of act or attitude, in order to be purified from sin's corrupting influence and dominating power (Eph. 4:22-24; 2 Tim. 2:21). We pray for God to search our lives to locate and redeem us from secret sins hidden even to our own consciousness (Ps. 19:12-14). It is our duty to consecrate ourselves to God's will (Rom. 12:1-2).

When we accept the grace that God provides, sanctification becomes real in us. There are two scriptural conditions: He will "give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:13) and "to those who obey him" (Acts 5:32). Praying and obeying, walking in the light as he is in the light (1 John 1:7), and purifying and consecrating our lives before God are the ways to realize the sanctifying presence of the Holy Spirit. Then God opens to us the fullness of the redemption that Jesus has provided for his people, a life pleasing to God.

