

Definitive Sanctification and Romans 6

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Today the term sanctification is commonly used to describe the life long process in which a believer puts off sinful behavior and grows in holiness. The doctrines of union with Christ and regeneration are often completely left out of discussions on sanctification. Also, sanctification is often treated as a side compartment or subcategory to justification. Such a treatment of sanctification is unfortunate for both justification and sanctification directly come from Christ Himself and His work. Both are the results of union with Christ in His life, death and resurrection.¹ If Christ is the trunk then both are branches. Therefore, before one examines progressive sanctification one first must consider union with Christ and the definitive sanctification that results from it.

The most detailed and systematic discussion of sanctification in the New Testament is found in Romans 6:1-7:6. One should note that before Paul issues even one imperative regarding the Christian life he spends a good deal of time discussing the foundation of personal godliness. For Paul all the imperatives relating to a Christian's progressive sanctification are grounded upon definitive sanctification which is the direct result of union with Christ. By virtue of a believer's intimate union with Christ in His death and resurrection Christians have been delivered from the power of sin. Jesus' death is the reason that Christians have died to the reigning, enslaving, defiling power of sin. His resurrection is the reason that Christians have and live in newness of life. Definitive sanctification refers to the (once and for all) defeat of the power of sin and the simultaneous renovation and renewal of the sinner that occurs at the inception of the Christian life. The older Reformed theologians referred to it as "initial sanctification." Definitive or initial sanctification is virtually synonymous with regeneration. This teaching is clearly reflected in the Westminster Standards: "Sanctification is the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness." (*Shorter Catechism* Q. 35). "They who are effectually called and regenerated, having a new heart and a new spirit created in them, are further sanctified, really and personally, through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection" (*Confession of Faith*, xv: 1).

The Bible emphasizes that Christ (and His redemptive work) is the ultimate source of a believer's sanctification. The ethical imperatives in the epistles arise out of and are rooted in the

¹ John Murray says that, "Union with Christ is a very inclusive subject. It embraces the wide span of salvation from its ultimate source in the eternal election of God to its final fruition in the glorification of the elect. It is not simply a phrase of the application of redemption; it underlies every aspect of redemption both in its accomplishment and in its application. Union with Christ binds all together and insures that to all for whom Christ has purchased redemption he effectively applies and communicates the same." (*Redemption Accomplished and Applied* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955] 165).

gracious indicatives of the gospel. Salvation achieved includes both our regeneration and sanctification. These "graces" are not a product of the human will, neither are they arbitrarily bestowed by the Father. They are the inevitable result of union with Christ.

There are many passages that support this teaching. Jesus prayed: "Sanctify them by your truth. Your word is truth. As You sent He into the world, I also have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth" (John 17:17-19). Our Lord declared that His being set apart unto humiliation unto death was the meritorious cause of His people's sanctification. "Jesus Christ... gave Himself for us, that he might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works" (Tit. 2:13-14). There is a direct correlation between Christ's vicarious sufferings and our sanctification. Everyone who is redeemed is also purged. As Paul says, "But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God--and righteousness and sanctification and redemption--that, as it is written, 'He who glories, let him glory in the Lord'" (1 Corinthians 1:30-31). We are not to be puffed up for everything we have comes from the hand of Christ. Christians are "sanctified in Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:2). When Paul describes the Corinthian believers' definitive sanctification he uses the aorist passive, thus indicating an instantaneous act of God whereby they were changed from a state of corruption to that of holiness: "You were washed, but you were sanctified, but justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:11). The apostle tells us that "Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it, that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:25-27). Hodge writes, "The design of Christ's death was to make his people holy. It accomplishes this end by reconciling them to God, and by securing for them the gift of the Holy Ghost."² All who are declared righteous by virtue of the merits of Christ are also made holy through union with Him. Sanctification and justification do not exist apart from each other, for both are effects of union with Christ.

The author of Hebrews points to the objective work of Christ as foundation of our sanctification. "Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate" (Heb. 13:12). Christ's shed blood not only removes the guilt and penalty of sin but also merits and guarantees the application of His work to His people. Thus our Lord is the "author," "captain" or "pioneer" of salvation in the most comprehensive sense of the term (cf.. Heb. 2:10; 12:2). Sinclair Ferguson writes, "Jesus is the 'author' of our sanctification, in the sense that he creates it for us, but he is also its 'pioneer' because...he does so out of his own incarnate life, death, and resurrection. He is the 'pioneer' of our salvation, because...he has endured the cross, despising its shame and the opposition of sinners, and is now seated at God's right hand. He is the first and only fully sanctified person. He has climbed God's holy hill with clean hands and a pure heart (Ps. 24:3-6). It is as the 'Lead Climber' that he gives the

² Charles Hodge, *Ephesians* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1964 [1856]) 233.

sanctification he has won to others (Acts 5:31)."³ Jesus is "the Prince of life" (Acts 3:15), "and He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence" (Col. 1:18).

As noted earlier, the New Testament teaches that regeneration or "initial sanctification" is the starting point or experimental beginning of the Christian life. It, like all the saving graces, is the effect of union with Christ. "And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. But God, who is rich in mercy because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:1-7). For Paul the decisive events that determine the Christian life all occurred in the past in redemptive history. There is a covenantal and vital union between Christ and His people, which determines the elects' death to sin and life of holiness. Hodge writes, "The resurrection, the quickening, and raising up on Christ's people, were in an important sense accomplished when he rose from the dead and sat down at the right hand of God.... The life of the whole body is in the head, and therefore when the head rose, the body rose. Each in his order, however, --first Christ, and then they that are Christ's."⁴ Christ had to assume a human nature and live as a man in this fallen world as the second Adam in order to impart life to His seed. Our regeneration comes from our union with Christ in His resurrection. Thus in Colossians 2:13 Paul says, "And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses." Paul bases his exhortations to the Colossians on the accomplished fact of union with Christ in His death and resurrection. "If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.... Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (Col. 3:1-3, 5).

The doctrine of definitive sanctification was not unique to Paul. Peter also bases the imperative upon the indicative. Christ "who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness--by whose stripes you were healed" (1 Peter 2:24). Peter bases Christian living upon our mystical union with Christ in His death. By virtue of our union with Christ in His death the dominion of sin over us is broken. To not live a holy life is a contradiction of that historical reality. Peter continues with the same idea in Chapter 4. He writes, "Therefore, since Christ has suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with

³ Sinclair B. Ferguson, "The Reformed View" in *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, edited by Donald L. Alexander (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity, 1988) 49.

⁴ Charles Hodge, *Ephesians* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1964 [1856]) 73.

the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God" (1 Peter 4:1-2). When Peter says, "for he who suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin" he is not referring to our own sufferings but to our suffering in Christ. "In the Greek suffered, like suffered in 1a, is an aorist participle, and has finished [NKJV "has ceased"] is in the perfect tense; they designate therefore a definite experience in the past and the state resulting from it...."⁵ This means that those people who were united with Jesus in His suffering and death are dead to sin and now live as slaves of righteousness. The decisive factor for Christian living is not our past but Christ's past.⁶

The apostle John also teaches definitive sanctification. However, he does so from a different perspective. Paul and Peter point directly to union with Christ in His death and resurrection while John points to the consequence of the union--a believer's regeneration. "Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God" (1 John 3:9). The person who has been regenerated by God and has the Holy Spirit in him cannot continue in the life of sin that characterized his unregenerate state. "The believer is the one who has secured the victory over the world, is immune to the dominion of the evil one, and is no longer characterized by that which is of the evil one, and is no longer characterized by that which is of the world, 'the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life' (1 Jn. 2:16)."⁷ Regeneration, which is a direct result of union with Christ, causes a "decisive and irreversible breach with the world and with its defilement and power."⁸ The person who is born again and has the Holy Spirit no longer loves the world and no longer habitually practices sin but instead loves Jesus Christ (1 Jn. 2:3-5), loves the brethren (1 Jn. 1:9-10) and keeps the commandments of God (1 Jn. 2:3-6, 17, 29; 3:10).

Now that we have briefly examined the scriptural basis for "definitive" or "initial" sanctification a return to Romans chapter six is necessary in order to more thoroughly examine the particulars of the doctrine. Paul writes,

"What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Likewise

⁵ J. N. D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and of Jude* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1969) 167.

⁶ Sinclair B. Ferguson, "The Reformed View" in *Christian Spirituality*, 57.

⁷ John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1977) 2:283.

⁸ Ibid.

you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ our Lord. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace" (Rom. 6:1-14).

The apostle Paul in chapter 5 concluded his lengthy discussion of justification by faith apart from the works of the law. In the second half of the chapter, Paul sets forth the contrast between Adam and Christ. From Adam's offense came the reign of sin and death. But Christ by His redemptive work brings justification and life. "Where sin abounded, grace abounded much more" (v. 21). In chapter six Paul introduces a new subject (sanctification) by asking the question "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" (Rom. 6:1). This question is reminiscent of an earlier hypothetical objection to the gospel: "Let us do evil [continue sinning] that good may come [that grace may abound even more]" (Rom. 3:8). For Paul the doctrine of sanctification is the answer to those who slander the gospel by interpreting it in an antinomian manner. Jewish apologists argued that if people are saved apart from the law and human merit (solely by grace) then Christianity is a religion of lawlessness. In other words, if you do not have to do good works to be saved then why not have a good time and sin as much as you please?

Unfortunately this antinomian kind of reasoning has plagued the church from its beginning. The apostolic church had its antinomian gnostics, Nicolaitans, Jezebelites and rank hedonists (cf. 2 Pt. 2:10-22; 1 Jn. 2:3-23; 4:1-6; 2 Jn. 7-11; Jude 4; Rev. 2:14-15, 20-24, etc.). Jude warned the church against such teaching when he wrote: "For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ" (Jude 4). Today the evangelical church is plagued with the carnal Christian heresy. People who hold this teaching reject what the Reformers called the third use of the moral law (i.e., as a guide and obligation for godly living). They also teach that obedience to Christ as Lord is optional for believers. A good theme song for such false teachers would be: "Free from the Law, O blessed condition, I can sin as I please and still have remission." When people who are sinners by nature are told that obedience is not required but is merely an option the result is predictable. Ethically many so-called "evangelicals" behave no differently than their pagan counterparts. The rates of sexual immorality, adultery, fornication, divorce, dishonest business practices and so on are virtually the same among "evangelicals" as the surrounding heathen culture. Romans 6 is the anti-dote to all such heretical teaching.

Paul answers the false inference with a decisive and emphatic repudiation: "Certainly not!", "By no means!" (NIV, RSV). Perish the thought!" (Lenski), "May it never be!" (NASB). After Paul reacts with abhorrence and indignation he systematically sets forth the doctrine that union with Christ in His death and resurrection not only removes the guilt of sin but also its power and reign over us. "For grace does more than justify: it also sanctifies. It unites us to

Christ (1-14), and initiates us into a new slavery to righteousness (15-23)."⁹ For Paul the idea that a Christian can continue living in sin is rendered *impossible* because of this vital union. The question "How shall we who have died to sin live any longer in it?" (v.2) shows at the outset the absurdity of the false inference regarding grace. "Death and life cannot coexist; we cannot be dead and living with respect to the same thing at the same time."¹⁰

At verse three Paul begins to explain his initial premise. "Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ were baptized into His death?" The apostle reminds the believers of the meaning of Christian baptism. Baptism into Christ signifies our union with Him and this union means that we receive all the benefits of salvation that he achieved. Shedd writes, "Believers are not baptized in order to bring about a union with Christ, but because such a union has been brought about. The rite has reference to this fact of union, and is the sign, and not the cause, of it. Baptism presupposes regeneration, and does not produce it."¹¹ One of the benefits of this union is our union with Christ in His atoning death. Jesus' vicarious death removes the guilt of our sin and causes victory over the pollution of sin. The pollution of sin is remedied in a definitive sense at regeneration; then is progressively mortified throughout life and is totally eradicated for the soul at death (the body is fully sanctified at the resurrection).

Paul continues: "Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life' (v. 4). By mentioning a Christian's "burial with Him through baptism into death," Paul continues his previous thought and sets the stage for his discussion of the significance of Christ's resurrection. (The apostle is not commenting on the mode of baptism, for Jesus body was placed in a stone tomb and was not placed under the earth and covered with dirt). A believer's union with Christ in His burial emphasizes and certifies his union with Him in death. Jesus died, was placed in a tomb and was in a state of death for three days. Our union with Christ in this historical process is a necessary precondition to the new life that we receive in His resurrection. Hodge writes, "Therefore, says the apostle, such being the nature of our union with Christ, expressed in baptism, it follows, that those who are buried with Christ; they are as effectually shut out from the kingdom of Satan, as those who are in the grave are shut out from the world."¹²

⁹ John Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity, 1994), 167.

¹⁰ John Murray, *The Epistle To The Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 1:213. James Fraser writes: "[W]hen, in the text under consideration, Christians are said to *be baptized into Christ' death*, we have cause to understand by it that baptism doth apply, exhibit, and seal to them the benefits of Christ' death, and that it is a solemn rite, whereby believers are invested in a fellowship in his death and in the benefits and happy consequences of it: so that as he died to sin, dying in their voice [i.e., place], so by virtue thereof they are dead to sin; that is, made free from its reign and dominion. Thus the ordinance of baptism doth exhibit and seal to their faith (*A Treatise On Sanctification* [Audubon, NJ.: Old Paths, 1992 (1774, 1897)], 45.).

¹¹ William G. T. Shedd, *Commentary On Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980 [1879], 150. Regarding the idea that Paul is teaching baptismal regeneration, John Stott (an Anglican) writes: "It is inconceivable that the apostle Paul, having spent three chapters arguing that justification is by faith alone, should now shift his ground, contradict himself and declare that after all salvation is by baptism. No, we must give the apostle credit for consistency of thought" (*Romans*, p 174).

¹² Charles Hodge, *Romans* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1975 [1835], 94.

Before we discuss the significance of our union with Christ in His resurrection, a comparison between some erroneous views regarding the phrase “dead to sin” with the correct interpretation is necessary. A common but incorrect interpretation says that death to sin means that Christians are totally unresponsive to the temptations of sin in the same manner that a physical corpse is unresponsive to external sensations. This view is reflected in J. B. Philip's translation for Romans 6:7: "a dead man can safely be said to be immune to the power of sin." It is believed that Christ completely eradicated a believer's sinful nature. Such teaching is a type of perfectionism.

Is the total eradication of a believer's sinful nature what Paul had in mind when wrote this passage? There are a number of reasons why such an interpretation must be rejected. First, if Christians are "immune" from sin or "totally unresponsive" to temptations as a corpse is to the rays of the sun, then the dozens of exhortations in the New Testament not to commit sin would be unnecessary. Pink writes, "It renders meaningless many scriptural exhortations, such as Rom. 6:12, 2 Cor.7:1, Eph. 4:22, 2 Tim. 2:22-- 'flee also youthful lusts', shows plainly they were still present even in the godly Timothy! Were the carnal nature gone from the Christian, he would be quite unfitted for such duties as the confessing of sins (1 John 1:9), loathing himself for them (Job 40:4), praying earnestly for the pardon of them (Matt. 6:12), sorrowing over them with godly sorrow (2 Cor. 7:10), accepting the chastisement of them (Heb. 12:5-11), vindicating God for the same (Psa. 119:75), and offering Him the sacrifice of a broken and a contrite heart (Psa. 51:17).¹³ Even in the book of Romans there are many commands to avoid sinful behavior: "do not let sin reign in your mortal body" (6:12), "do not be conformed to this world " (12:2), "cast off the works of darkness...and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts" (13:12,14). Further, in Romans 8:13 believers are commanded to "put to death the deeds of the body". In this verse the term body is set in parallel to the term flesh, which refers to the sinful nature. If the sinful nature were totally eradicated by Christ, then Paul would be commanding believers to put to death something that is already dead. The fact that the New Testament presents the whole Christian life as one of constant warfare against the flesh means that the “immune to sin” interpretation is theologically impossible.

Second, the perfectionist interprets contradicts universal Christian experience. Speaking of believers John wrote, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 Jn.1:8). When Paul describes his experience as a believer in Romans 7:14-25, he tells us plainly that even the best Christians continually struggle with "the flesh" (i.e., the remaining pollution or corruption of sin). A study of Christian's biographies, interviews with honest current day professing Christians and our own experience as Christians will testify to this truth of Scripture. The unscriptural perfectionist interpretation of "dead to sin" is unfortunate for it invariably leads its followers down a number of unsavory paths. Some redefine sin in a most external Pharisaical fashion. Others are simply self-deceived and dishonest with their own "Christian" experience. Still others simply reject the word of God as contrary to reality. Sadly, there are some who even have mental breakdowns. "The doctrine of the "Perfectionists" hardens

¹³ Arthur W. Pink, *The Doctrine of Sanctification* (Swengal, PA: Reiner Pub., 1975) 67.

souls in delusion.... It greatly discourages sincere souls who labor to get holiness in the right way--by faith in Christ--and leads them to think that they labor in vain, because they find themselves still sinful and far from perfect, when they have done their best to attain it."¹⁴

Another false interpretation regarding "dead to sin" is that Paul is describing an experience that believers must enter into as a new stage of Christian experience. Henry Boardman gives us a description of the more extreme version of this type of thinking: "The consecrating act, according to these teachers, marks the crises of your history. It carries you over from a state of bondage, to a state of freedom; out of a dismal life of toil, and discouragement, and uncertainty, into one of rest, and joy, and assurance; from a condition in which you sin, more or less, by transgression or omission every day, to one in which you do not consciously sin at all."¹⁵ Such teaching is the cornerstone of what is called the "Higher Life" or "the Victorious Life" movement. The basic premise is that Christians become "dead to sin" by an act of the will. In order for the believer to have the victorious life he must yield himself. He must: "let go and let God," "let Christ be all in all;" "submit to the second blessing;" "fully surrender to Christ" and so on. To put it crassly the central idea of the higher life concept is that a believer must, by his own will, yield himself in such a way as to be zapped by the Holy Spirit so that in a moment of time total victory is attained.

There are a number of reasons why this view must be rejected as unscriptural. First, when Paul says that Christians have "died" to sin (cf. Rom. 6:2, 7) the verb is in the indicative, not the imperative mood. Paul is not commanding believers (in Rom. 6:2, 7) to do something. He is describing a historical reality. He is reminding them of what already took place in Christ. We died to sin in the past when Christ died. Second, what Paul describes in Romans 6 is not something predicated of only super spiritual, victorious, higher life Christians but of all believers. Every Christian has "died to sin." "[D]ead to sin, signifies an advantage, blessedness, and privilege of a true Christian's state, rather than mere matter of duty."¹⁶ The higher life doctrine separates Christ the Savior from Christ the sanctifier. It separates Christ's vicarious work (the foundation of salvation) from the Holy Spirit's application of it. Instead of the ascended victorious Christ sovereignly sending the Spirit, the Spirit is controlled by the human will. Further, it denies the life long process of progressive sanctification because everything is boiled down to the one act of consecration.

What then does union with Christ in His death mean? There are basically two different interpretations among Reformed interpreters. The first view says that "dead to sin" refers not to the power of sin but to its guilt. Common arguments in favor of this interpretation are: (1) Death in Scripture is often used in legal terms to describe the penalty of sin. This (many argue) is certainly Paul's use of the word prior to chapter 6 (cf. Rom. 1:32; 5:6-10, 12-21) and in Romans 6:21, 23. Would Paul after using death in a forensic sense throughout the epistle suddenly switch to a figurative sense with little or no explanation whatsoever? (2) When verse 10 says--"for the

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Henry A. Boardman, *The "Higher Life" Doctrine of Sanctification Tried By The Word of God* (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1996 [1877]), 77.

¹⁶ James Fraser, *A Treatise On Sanctification* (Audubon, NJ: Old Paths, 1992 [1774]), 41.

death that He died, He died to sin once for all”--it can only mean that He died to the penal power of sin for Christ was never subject to the depraving influence of sin. (3) Verse 7 is better translated: "For he who has died has been *justified* from sin." Stott writes, "True, there is some slight evidence from early Jewish literature that *dikaioo* could mean to 'make free or pure' (BAGD). But there is a perfectly good word in Greek for to 'set free', namely *eleutheroo*, which in fact Paul uses in verses 18 and 22, whereas *dikaioo* comes fifteen times in Romans, and twenty-five times in the New Testament, in all of which occurrences the natural meaning is to 'justify.'"¹⁷ Thus, (according to this view) Paul is saying that our justification by Christ's atoning death effects our death to sin as a habitual practice. "As Christ's revivification naturally follows his crucifixion, so the believer's sanctification naturally follows his justification."¹⁸

The second interpretation teaches that "died to sin" refers to a Christian's freedom from the reign, or dominion of sin. The argument in favor of this view is taken from the context of the passage. In Romans 6 Paul is no longer discussing justification from sin's guilt but deliverance from its power. The question that begins this section—"shall we continue in sin"--certainly does not mean, "shall we continue under the guilt of sin"? When Paul discusses union with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection in verses 3 and 4 the outcome of a Christian's union with Christ in His resurrection is a change in the believer's walk. This vital union produces a change in behavior. While it is true that justification does not occur apart from regeneration and sanctification, a change in a person's legal status does not directly affect a person's moral state. What changes a person morally (i.e., his subjective state) is regeneration and the baptism in the Holy Spirit. We know from other portions of Scripture (such as Eph. 2:1-6; Col. 2:12) that regeneration is effected directly by union with Christ. Therefore, in accordance with the analogy of Scripture, the context and logic, it makes more sense to regard "died to sin" as a moral change in the believer and not a forensic declaration. This interpretation is supported by verse 6 which says that the "old man was crucified" with Christ. The phrase "old man" does not refer to a believer's guilt but to the believer himself as he was in his unregenerate state. Further, the phrase "body of sin" (v 6) does not refer to the mass of sin as guilt but to the fallen corrupt human nature (cf. Rom. 8:12-13 where the term body [*soma*] is used in the same manner as the term flesh [*sarx*]).

There are many indicators in the rest of the chapter that support the "dominion of sin" interpretation. After discussing the implications of union with Christ, Paul then issues commands based on the doctrine: "therefore do not let sin reign (v 12); "do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness" (v13). Why? "For sin shall not have dominion over you" (v. 14). In verse 16 and following Paul clearly speaks of deliverance from the *bondage* of sin as a slave master. "And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness" (v. 18). The contrast in these verses is not guilt of sin versus slaves of righteousness, but slaves (or servants) to evil behavior (uncleanness, lawlessness [v. 19]) versus slaves of God (righteousness, holiness).

¹⁷ James Fraser, *A Treatise On Sanctification*, 51.

¹⁸ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on The Whole Bible* (McLean, VA: Mac Donald Pub., n. d.), 6:403.

In union with Christ a believer is not only delivered from sin's guilt but also from sin's reign as a slave master.

When Jesus came to earth and assumed a human nature, He did not have the pollution of sin. But, he did suffer under the reign of sin. He was born without inherent depravity and never committed sin. However, His human nature was liable to the normal infirmities of fallen man so that He could suffer and die in the elect's place. His whole life was a life of suffering. He was subject to trial, the assaults of Satan, the hatred and contempt of the covenant people and was tortured and killed. "Insofar as Christ died for us, we must say that he submitted himself not only to death, but to the reign of sin through death. He too died to sin, in the sense of dying to its reign over him. It may further clarify Paul's thinking here if we remember that for him, the resurrection involved Christ's deliverance (his vindication or justification) from the reign of sin in death (1 Tim. 3:16). In union with him, we too are delivered from sin's reign as a tyrant-king as well as sin's guilt. Only because we are free from both are we in any position to resist the remaining power of sin"¹⁹

Paul teaches that by virtue of our union with Christ in His death we experience a decisive breach with the reign of sin over us that is so radical it can be described as a death to that realm. Murray writes; "When a person dies he is no longer active in the sphere or realm or relation in reference to which he has died. His connection with that realm has been dissolved; he has no further communications with those who still live in that realm, nor do they have with him. He is no longer *en rapport* with life here; it is no longer the sphere of life and activity for him."²⁰ While believers are not sinless or totally free from sin (cf. Rom. 7:14-25), they are not slaves of sin. Their old life has perished. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (2 Cor. 5:17). Christians are set free from sin with a definitiveness which death alone can achieve.

Union with Christ not only entails the mortification of the depravity of the flesh but also renovation or newness of life. Paul continues: "just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection" (6:4b-5). The power of sin in a believer's life is broken for a distinct purpose, that Christians may walk in newness of life. Union with Christ has both a negative and positive aspect. Christ's death causes "death to sin". His resurrection causes a new life of obedience. The power of sin is not broken for a life of inactivity and contemplation. Christians are saved unto good works (Eph. 2:10). Fraser writes, "To be made free from sin, that sin hath no dominion over us, is a negative proposition; it expresses nothing of itself concerning fruitfulness in holiness and good works."²¹

Union with Christ does not take us from the realm of sin to a neutral state, but to a state of newness of life. The benefits of redemption are not imparted arbitrarily by God; nor are they

¹⁹ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Reformed View* [Of Sanctification] pp. 56-57.

²⁰ John Murray, *Collected Writings*, 2:279.

²¹ James Fraser, *A Treatise On Sanctification*, 51.

imparted on the basis of the human will. The resurrection of Christ that took place in the past and is objective is the basis of regeneration. There is a vital union between Christ and the elect that guarantees a believer's definitive sanctification and progressive walk in holiness. The resurrected Christ sends the Holy Spirit who first works monergistically to regenerate dead sinners and then works synergistically in a believer's progressive sanctification. Because of our relation to Christ, our union with Him we receive His resurrection life. This applies not only to our final resurrection to eternal life (cf. Jn. 11:25), but also to our spiritual quickening. God has "made us alive together with Christ...and raised us up together, and made us sit in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:5, 6). "Newness of life supposes newness of heart, for out of the heart are the issues of life, and there is no way to make the stream sweet but by making the spring so."²²

Paul emphasizes and elaborates on this same point in verse 5. "For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection." The word translated "united together" (*sunfutos*) means literally "grown together", or "ingrafted." We are united to our Lord in such a way that His own life-giving virtue is given to us by His Spirit. This harkens back to Christ's reference to Himself as a vine that imparts life-giving sap to its branches. "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5). Calvin writes, "There is great force in this work, and it clearly shows, that the Apostle does not exhort, but rather teach us what benefit we derive from Christ; for he requires nothing from us, which is to be done by our attention and diligence, but speaks of the grafting made by the hand of God."²³

In verses 6 and 7 Paul explains the first half of verse 5: "knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin." Reformed commentators interpret the phrase "old man" in two different ways. Some argue that the "old man" is equivalent to the sinful or corrupt human nature. The old carnal nature that we all inherited from Adam was crucified with Christ. Others teach that "old man" refers not merely to the sinful nature but to the *whole person* as he was in his unregenerate state. Lenski says "it denotes our entire being as it existed before regeneration, 'old' pointing back to that former existence."²⁴

Although many excellent commentators hold to the "sinful nature" interpretation the second interpretation is to be preferred. The old man is a person who is "in Adam." It is a person who is a slave to sin: corrupt, carnal, depraved, spiritually dead or in the flesh. The old man was crucified with Christ. The verb is an aorist indicative. This indicates (once again) that Paul is not describing a process or something that we do but is discussing the once and for all historical death of Christ. The definitive victory over the old man occurred at Golgotha. Note the similarity to Galatians 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and

²² Matthew Henry, *Commentary On The Whole Bible* (McLean VA: Mac Donald Pub., n. d.), 6:403.

²³ John Calvin, *Commentary On A Harmony Of The Evangelists* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 27:223.

²⁴ R. C. H. Lenski, *Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Pub. 1961, [1936]) 401.

gave Himself for Me." By virtue of our incorporation into Christ we participate in His death and this results in our regeneration whereby the old man is gone forever.

This death of the old man is often misunderstood. While it is true that Paul is speaking of something that is radical and decisive--"the old man was crucified"--this does mean that the sinful nature is totally eradicated in believers. In principle it is defeated but prior to our heavenly existence it is our ever-present enemy. Sanctification begins in regeneration and in regeneration the old man (who has a heart of stone, who hates God and is a slave to sin) is removed. That man, the "old man" died with Christ on the cross. The breach with the past is decisive, for initial sanctification affects every aspect of what we are (spirit and body). Thus, our whole life is new. We are a new creation. We have hearts of flesh that hate sin and love Jesus Christ. God has put the "seeds of repentance unto life and the other saving graces into our hearts"²⁵ because of our union with Christ. Although the old man is dead and we are no longer what we were, there are still "some remnants of corruption in every part"²⁶ of our being that progressively must be mortified.

Another common misunderstanding is to view a Christian as both an old man and a new man simultaneously. These terms are sometimes used to describe two warring factions within the believer. The problem with this view is that Paul uses the designation "old man" to describe not a part of man but the whole man as he was in Adam, the unregenerate man who is dominated by and enslaved to sin. Therefore, to argue that a Christian is both an "old man" and "new man" at the same time is as absurd as teaching that a believer is both regenerate and unregenerate at the same time. Further, the death of the old man occurred in salvation history at the cross. When Christ died the old man died with Him. Paul doesn't say that the old man was hurt or partially killed but crucified. Commentators who argue that since crucifixion is a long, drawn-out process therefore the death of the old man is progressive simply ignore the force of the aorist.

This interpretation of Romans 6:6 does raise a good question. How can Paul say in Romans that the death of the "old man" is objective, definitive and occurs in Christ and then say to the Ephesians "you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man" (4:22)? How can a believer put off the old man if he is already dead? There is not a contradiction between these passages, for one passage discusses what occurred objectively in Christ while the other is dealing with our subjective experience as believers. It is true that what we were in Adam died with Christ. However, it is also true that in our experience we still must put off the habits, characteristics and inclinations of what we once were before our regeneration. It is precisely because we died with Christ that Paul can say "put off the old man." Note the phrase, "concerning your former conduct." Paul is saying, "Put off the sinful behavior the characterized your life before you were a Christian." He is telling the Ephesians to live a life that is consistent with who they are in Christ. Likewise, when Paul tells believers to "put on the new man" he reminds them of the positive aspect of regeneration (24b).

²⁵ *Larger Catechism*, Q. 75.

²⁶ *Confession of Faith*, 15:2.

Let us return to verse six: "knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin." Paul says that our old man was crucified with Christ (which is equivalent to "we died to sin" in verse 2) for a distinct purpose: "that the body of sin might be done away with." This raises two questions. What does Paul mean when he says "body of sin" and what does he mean by the Greek word *katargethe* translated "done away with"?

The phrase "body of sin" has been interpreted in a number of different manners. Some regard it as a figurative expression for the total mass of sin. Others regard it as the physical body dominated by sin. In this vein John Murray says it is "the body as conditioned and controlled by sin."²⁷ Godet argues that it is: "the body in so far as it serves as an instrument of sin in the human life."²⁸ Still others teach that it means that the body is the source or seat of sin. The "body of sin" also is interpreted as meaning the sinful nature. The sinful body is a synonym for the flesh. Fraser says that the body of sin does "not mean the human body, but that whole system of corrupt principles, propensities, lust, and passions, which have, since the fall, possessed man's nature, and is coextended and commensurate to all the human powers and faculties."²⁹ There are even some scholars who argue that body of sin is synonymous with the old man in verse 6.

Which of these interpretations is superior? A few of these views can be easily ruled unsatisfactory. The idea that the body is the seat of sin is unbiblical and Platonic. Jesus said, "For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witnesses, blasphemies" (Matt. 15:19). The interpretation that says that the body of sin and the old man are synonymous should also be rejected for two reasons. First, it is unlikely that Paul would introduce a new term to describe the old man unless he wanted to confuse his audience. Second, this interpretation assumes that "the old man" refers only to the depraved nature, which as we have just seen is not what Paul had in mind. The "mass of sin" interpretation is unsatisfactory for it is very confusing. Paul is not discussing sin as a separate body or mass but as an intrinsic corrupting influence.

What about the view that says Paul means the body dominated by sin or "as conditioned and controlled by sin"? Is it true that the human body is conditioned and controlled by sin? Yes. There is no question that sin has an influence over the physical aspect of man. People who engage in certain types of sinful behavior develop habitual sin patterns. People over time become enslaved to certain types of sins. They have committed these sins so long that they are second nature to them. It is as though certain repeated sinful behaviors are engrained directly into the brain. Jeremiah says: "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? Then may you also do good who are *accustomed* to do evil" (Jer. 13:23). The relationship between the body and mind is complex and little understood. However, it is quite real. Although there is no question that sinful behavior can condition the body, is that what Paul had in mind when he used the

²⁷ John Murray, *Romans*, 1:220.

²⁸ Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary On Romans* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977), 245.

²⁹ James Fraser, *A Treatise on Sanctification*, 61.

phrase "body of sin"? This interpretation (given the context and the analogy of scripture) is too narrow and should be rejected.

Paul has said that the old man was crucified with Christ. Everything we were in fallen Adam was slain and buried in Christ. Was this accomplished for the purpose of merely subduing habitual sin patterns and bodily appetites? No. Christ by His Spirit subdues the corruption that is in every aspect of our being--both body and soul. The pollution of sin affects our body and our spirit. Paul said, "let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit" (2 Cor. 7:1). The best interpretation is that Paul is using the phrase "body of sin" as a synonym for the term flesh. This interpretation is supported by the concluding clause of verse 6, "that we should no longer be slaves of sin." This purpose clause further explains the two preceding clauses. Union with Christ in His death results in the release of a believer from slavery to sin. The termination of our bondage to sin entails more than the subjugation of bodily sins. "[N]ow that it is enfeebled and deprived of its reigning power and dominion; but [we] might assert our liberty by repressing, and mortifying it."³⁰

There is one remaining question regarding verse 6. What does the phrase "might be done away with" (NKJV, NASB, NIV, cf. ASV) mean? The Greek word used here (*katargeo*) has a rather broad range of meaning. It has been translated "abolish" (Eph. 2: 15, 2 Tim. 1:10), "loosed" or released (Rom. 7:2), "put away" (1 Cor. 13:11), "to bring to naught" (1 Cor. 1:28), "destroy" (Heb. 2:14). Thayer gives the following possible primary meanings of *katargeo*: "1. to render idle, unemployed, inactive, inoperative...to deprive of its strength...to deprive of force, influence, power."³¹ Secondary possibilities are: "2. to cause to cease, put an end to, do away with, annul, abolish."³² Given the context of Romans 6:6 the word *katargeo* should not be translated "destroyed" or "rendered powerless" for the sinful nature is not totally destroyed until death. (In principle it is totally destroyed at the cross. Paul however, at this point not speaking eschatologically.) What the apostle means is that union with Christ causes the enslaving, reigning power of our sinful natures to be broken or subdued. Although it is not completely annihilated, it no longer dominates the believer as a slave master or tyrant king. We no longer live as slaves to sin for we are set free by Christ.

Paul in verse 7 both sums up his preceding statements (vs. 2,3,5) and explains the teaching of verse 6. He writes, "For he who has died has been freed from sin" (v.7). (Since we have already discussed whether Paul meant freed from sin's power or freedom from its guilt this aspect of verse 7 will not be revisited.) A person who has died "is freed and discharged from the authority of those who has dominion over him in his lifetime."³³ A slave master no longer has the authority or power to direct a slave who has died. When a person is united to Christ and regenerated he is set free from sin's dominion over him. "And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.... But now having been set free from sin and having become

³⁰ Ibid, 63.

³¹ Joseph Henry Thayer, *The New Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Lafayette, IN.: Apxa, 1979).

³² Ibid.

³³ Matthew Poole, *A Commentary On The Holy Bible* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1963 [1685]), 3:497.

slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end everlasting life' (Rom. 6:18,22). "Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin" (1 Pet. 4:1).

In verse 8 to 10 Paul repeats his theme regarding died to sin, yet he does so with the distinct purpose of returning to the implications of our union with Christ in His resurrection. "Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin once and for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God." In verses 6 and 7 Paul elaborated upon the first half of verse 5, which discusses union with Christ in His death. In verse 8 through 10 Paul's main concern is union with Christ in His resurrection. These verses are in the main an exposition of 5b. He also discusses our death with Christ, for the positive must be contrasted with the negative. Believers have not only died to sin and thus no longer live in sin's realm and under sin's dominion but they also are resurrected into a whole new life, a life of "obedience to righteousness" (v. 15); of slavery to God (v. 22); of slavery to righteousness (v. 18). When the apostle uses the future tense inverts 8, "we shall also live with Him" he is not (as a number of commentators assert) speaking of the bodily resurrection (even though it is theologically true that we rise because He rose). His concern in this context is sanctification. In 4b Paul says "that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father even so we also should walk in newness of life." This obviously refers to our present walk. In 5b Paul does us the future tense; however, he does so simply because the resurrection follows death. "Resurrection is always future to death; that is all." That Paul is speaking of our present newness of life and freedom and not the resurrection of the body is proven by the exhortations from verse 11 onward: "reckon yourselves...alive to God in Christ Jesus (v. 11); "present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead" (v 13).

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