

# THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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Email: [Jrob1517@aol.com](mailto:Jrob1517@aol.com)

Website: [www.trinityfoundation.org](http://www.trinityfoundation.org)

Telephone: 423.743.0199

Fax: 423.743.2005

## The Means of Sanctification

Edited by John W. Robbins

The Holy Spirit is the divine agent of sanctification, yet he uses *means* to accomplish his great work. We may classify the means as *primary* and *secondary*.

### *Primary Means*

The primary means of the Spirit's sanctification of the believer is the Word of God.

"Sanctify them through your truth: Your Word is truth" (*John* 17:17).

"And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the Word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified" (*Acts* 20:32).

"Husbands, love your wives, even as 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 . . ." (*Ephesians* 5:25, 26).

"Now you are clean through the Word which I have spoken unto you" (*John* 15:3).

"Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with

grace in your hearts to the Lord" (*Colossians* 3:16).

"Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. . . . Take heed unto yourself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this you shall both save yourself, and them that hear you" (*1 Timothy* 4:13, 16).

"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (*2 Timothy* 3:16, 17).

"As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the Word, that you may grow thereby . . ." (*1 Peter* 2:2).

The greatest danger exists when men try to separate God's Spirit from his Word. As Luther complained against the Enthusiasts, they sit in a corner or gaze up into Heaven for the Spirit, instead of studying the Word of God.

First, we should realize that the Word is compared to seed. As the life of the plant is in the seed, so the life of God is in his Word. He who receives the Word of God into his mind receives the very life and character of God. The germinating principles of truth will work like leaven to transform the entire life into the likeness of the divine character.

Second, Christ is always present in his Word.

"But the righteousness which is of faith speaks in this way, Do not say in your heart, Who shall ascend into Heaven? (that is, to bring Christ down from above); or, Who shall descend into the deep? (that is, to bring up Christ again from the dead.) But what does it say? The Word is near you, even in your mouth, and in your heart: that is, the Word of faith, which we preach . . ." (*Romans* 10:6-8).

In fact, Christ is the Word and the Word is Christ. Paul says, "We have the mind of Christ."

Third, the Word "is the vehicle of the Holy Spirit. When the Word is read, the Spirit is present" (Luther). Rather than words being a mere vehicle, Jesus said, "The words that I speak unto you, they are Spirit, and they are life" (*John* 6:63). Whether the Holy Spirit convicts, converts, quickens, comforts, heals, guides, or strengthens, he always does it by the Word. The Word may reach the heart in the words of the preacher, the entreaty of a friend, or even the warning of a foe. All these agencies God may use as instruments to declare his Word. But it is of utmost importance to realize that "God's Spirit is annexed to his Word" (Calvin). Being filled with God's Spirit is the same as being filled with God's Word (see *Ephesians* 5:18; *Colossians* 3:16). That is why Luke records that every time someone was filled with the Spirit, he opened his mouth and declared the Word of God (*Acts* 2:4, 11, 22; 4:31; *Luke* 1:67; etc.). If man's heart is filled with the Spirit, he will give evidence of it by speaking the words of God. "For he whom God has sent speaks the words of God: for God gives not the Spirit by measure unto him" (*John* 3:34). So when Paul commanded the Ephesians, "be filled with the Spirit," he added by way of explanation, "speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your hearts to the Lord" (*Ephesians* 5:18, 19).

Much that is being said today about the impartation of the Spirit is false. Many are claiming to have an exciting experience in the Holy Spirit who is given

directly to them quite apart from any objective revelation of God's Word. There are signs, miracles, tongues, laughter, and private revelations, but the exposition of God's Word is conspicuous by its absence. In some charismatic meetings, the reading of the Word of God is the least regarded part of the meeting.

The only safe place for our feet is to stand with the Reformers' declaration that men do not receive the Holy Spirit apart from the Word. He mediates himself to us only through the Word. Warned Luther: "Therefore I exhort you to be on guard against those noxious spirits who say: A man acquires the Holy Spirit by sitting in a corner, etc. A hundred thousand devils he will acquire, and you will not come to God." Therefore, we must affirm that there is no sanctification for those who neglect the Word.

## *Law and Gospel*

The sanctifying Word comes to men in two forms—Law and Gospel. God's Word, as "the sword of the Spirit" (*Ephesians* 6:17), has two cutting edges. Says the Lutheran Formula of Concord, "These two doctrines [Law and Gospel], we believe and confess, should ever and ever be diligently inculcated in the Church of God even to the end of the world. . . ." The right use of God's Word means the right use of the Law and Gospel. For instance, the Spirit uses the Law to convict of sin and wound the conscience (*Romans* 7:7-13), but the Spirit is not communicated to men through the law. "The Spirit is life" (*Romans* 8:10), but "if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law" (*Galatians* 3:21).

The Holy Spirit is communicated to men, not through their hearing of the law nor by their doing it, but by their understanding and belief of the Gospel (*Galatians* 3:1-3). Says the apostle Paul to the Thessalonians, "For our Gospel came unto you not in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance . . ." (*1 Thessalonians* 1:5). When Peter went to the home of Cornelius, he preached the message of forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ, and the revelation states, "While Peter

was speaking these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the Word" (*Acts* 10:44). We see all sorts of gimmicks being resorted to today that men may receive the Holy Spirit. Some advocate five steps; others more or less. People even take lessons on how to talk in tongues, or laugh, or they do something else to manipulate mind and emotions so that souls are carried away by some spiritual euphoria called the baptism of the Spirit. It is surely a sign of the end time, as Paul declares, "Now the Spirit speaks expressly that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of devils . . ." (*1 Timothy* 4:1). Let the priests of Baal scream and laugh and work themselves up to a high pitch of excitement around their altars, but let those armed with the Gospel, like faithful Elijah, raise the altar of God and place on it the true sacrifice for sin. When God sees this sacrifice presented in faith, he answers by fire. There can be no greater evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence than when the Gospel is faithfully proclaimed and men believe on Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Besides the fact that the Holy Spirit comes to men through faith in the Gospel (*Galatians* 3:13, 14) (and it is his presence that sanctifies), the Gospel brings with it a sanctifying influence: The Gospel is a revelation of the divine character. The gift of Christ reveals the Father's heart. In the cross we see truth and justice blended with mercy and compassion. As his people behold God as revealed in his crucified Son, the darkness of misapprehension of God's character is swept from their minds, and they come to appreciate his beauty of character. And the more they come to know him, the more they admire his character. This has a great sanctifying effect on the human character. "But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord" (*2 Corinthians* 3:18). The Gospel of the cross is a revelation of God's estimate of sin. Here we see that sin is the most costly thing in the universe. The unrelieved heinousness of sin is put on display in the sufferings of God's dear Son. God will by no means spare the guilty. Sin merits awful punishment. In this universe all debts must be paid. Here is no easygoing benevolence that easily

overlooks sin. By the cross sin is discerned in its hateful nature, and the believing soul is imbued with the resolve to hate sin and drive it from the soul.

The Gospel of God's love and forgiveness becomes the motive for all right conduct (*2 Corinthians* 5:14, 15). The strongest inducement for a Christian to obey the divine law is the fact that he has been graciously pardoned for having broken the law. He follows after sanctification because he has received justification. He obeys the law not in order to be forgiven, but because he has been forgiven (William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* [Zondervan, 1969], 2, 558).

Nothing enters so fully into the motives of conduct as a sense of the pardoning love of Christ. Forgiveness of past sins becomes the greatest incentive to avoid future ones. They are the great promises of the Gospel which rouse the believer to separate from everything displeasing to God (*2 Corinthians* 7:1; *Romans* 12:1; *2 Peter* 1:4; etc.).

The Gospel does what the law cannot: bring life and salvation to sinners. The ceremonial law points us to Christ; the moral law drives us to Christ; and Christ also points us back to the moral law as a rule of life. Jesus said, "If you love me, keep my commandments" (*John* 14:15). It was only when Paul was delivered from the law as a covenant of works that he could gratefully confess, "For I delight in the law of God after the inward man . . ." (*Romans* 7:22).

In the matter of *justification* the order is Law and Gospel. The law exposes our guilt and stops our mouths (*Romans* 3:19, 20) so that we are prepared for the message of justification by grace alone, for Christ's sake alone, through faith alone (*Romans* 3:24-26). Again, the law is a "schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith" (*Galatians* 3:24). Yet in some of the Pauline epistles we discern a different order. When writing to the Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians, for instance, the apostle first reminds them of the Gospel (the indicative), and on that basis he lays down the law (the imperative) as a rule of life for the believing community. So in the matter of

*justification* the order is Law and then Gospel. But in the matter of *sanctification* it is Gospel and then Law. Paul virtually says, "First, here is the Gospel. Now in view of what God has done for you and what you now are in Christ, this is how you ought to live."

Sin means breaking God's law (*1 John* 3:4). Justification means being set right before the law (*Romans* 2:13; 3:20-31). And what is holiness but a life conformed to the law of God? The effect of sanctification—the keeping of God's commandments—needs to be driven home in this permissive age. *Legalism* used to mean the method of trying to be saved by our obedience to the commands of God. But as Dr. Gordon Clark has pointed out,\* it has taken a new meaning. Today it is often taken to mean any conscientious obedience to the will of God as revealed in his Word. The man who trembles at God's Word (*Isaiah* 66:5) and is careful to submit his life to the authority of God's rule is in danger of being called a *legalist*.

If we look to Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden and to Christ's obedience in the wilderness and the Garden of Gethsemane, we will not think it a small matter whether we yield conscientious obedience to God or not. We will see that there is no greater evil in the universe than sin—the transgression of God's holy requirements. As disobedience to God's law is the sum of all misery, so obedience to his law is the sum of all happiness. God did not send his Son to suffer and die in infinite shame and humiliation in order that we might enter a new order in which we can regard his holy commandments lightly. The purpose of the atonement was not merely our salvation, but that the divine law and government might be maintained and vindicated. It was so the whole universe might understand God's estimate of sin and God's estimate of the holiness of his law.

If the confessions of the Reformation are unanimous in their rejection of salvation *by* the law, they are also at one in their insistence on the fact that we are saved *for* the keeping of the law. John Calvin declared, "Let us put far from us the ungodly notion that the law is not to be our rule, for it is our changeless rule of life." The Scripture teaches us that it is not in man to direct his steps (*Jeremiah*

10:23). This is as true of the converted man as of the unconverted man. It is true that the believer has the Holy Spirit, but we must not get the idea that the Spirit sets a man free from the need for an objective rule of life. The apostle Paul does not arrive at a "Spirit ethic." The Spirit is present in God's Word. Just as he leads us outside of ourselves to that "cross without" for justification, so he leads us to the "law without" for sanctification. We are justified by the outside righteousness of Christ and led in the way of holiness by the outside Word of Christ. Says the apostle, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (*2 Timothy* 3:16, 17). It is very apparent that Paul includes Law as well as Gospel in "all Scripture," for does not the Spirit use the law "for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness"? And although the Gospel inspires and motivates to good works, how may we be informed as to what works please God, except by understanding his law?

Therefore, it is as plain as day, and may be clear to all save those who are obstinately blind, that the Spirit sanctifies the believer by means of believing and understanding the Word of God, and that Word includes both Law and Gospel. The man who is being sanctified will exhibit the same attitude to the law as the man who wrote *Psalms* 119. Just as there is no justification for those who reject the Gospel, so there is no sanctification for those who despise the Law. The Word, therefore, is the indispensable means of sanctification. The Gospel brings the inspiration and power for obedience, and the Law illuminates the path of obedience. Sanctification, however, is neither our obedience nor our good works; those are the result of our sanctification by the Word and Spirit.

## *Secondary Means*

The Spirit of God also works through secondary means to promote the believer's growth in the life of holiness. God's people are called to separate from fellowship with unrepentant sinners: "Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stand in the way of sinners, nor sit in

the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law he meditates day and night" (*Psalms* 1:1-2). The apostle warns the church:

"Let no man deceive you with vain words: for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the children of disobedience. Be not therefore partakers with them. . . . And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them. For it is a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret" (*Ephesians* 5:6, 7, 11, 12).

"Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners" (*1 Corinthians* 15:33).

"Wherefore come out from among them, and be separate, says the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty" (*2 Corinthians* 6:17, 18).

The assembly of believers, who have been *called out* from the world and from false religious assemblies, is what the New Testament calls "the church." Here God's Word is preached and heard, the sacraments are administered, and the redeemed community has the benefit of Christian fellowship. The church is the kind of environment that every Christian needs. It is not Heaven, but as Luther says, the church is an inn for convalescents. Here the Christian needs to be encouraged, fed, edified, warned, and disciplined by the Word. The Bible says:

". . .not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as you see the day approaching" (*Hebrews* 10:25).

"Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with

grace in your hearts to the Lord" (*Colossians* 3:16).

"Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, you who are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering yourself, lest you also be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ" (*Galatians* 6:1, 2).

In the assembly the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper are administered as secondary means of grace. Apart from the Word, they are worthless. And apart from the Word, the assembly is worthless.