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## ADOPTION AND SANCTIFICATION





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MINISTRIES

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Tom Nettles

# Introduction

## From Profane Strangers to Holy Sons

This issue of the *Founders Journal* gives exposition of two biblical doctrines discussed in the twelfth and thirteenth chapters of the Second London Confession, adoption and sanctification. The adoption of sinners as sons of God with a view to transforming them into the image of His beloved Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, constitutes one of the most unfathomable blessings of grace. It is a gleaming two-edged sword in the arsenal of God's weaponry to subdue rebel creatures to constitute them loving sons.

One edge of the sword kills, and the other makes alive. One edge divides the indivisible and lays us bare before the eyes of Him with whom we must contend both now and in eternity. The other opens blind eyes and dead affections to see and love and trust the Son of God in our nature, tempted in all points as we but never with the effect of sin. In His ascension to the throne of God as our advocate, intercessor, righteous propitiation, and brother we are bidden to draw near with confidence to receive mercy. Not only forgiven and justified, we are granted the privileges of sons of God. Grace, unmerited, unfrustrable, freely sets out gifts to be enjoyed and operates internally that we might see how inexhaustibly pleasurable such gifts are.

Contrary to our merits but fully consistent with Christ's, we are changed from rebellious aliens and strangers into loving, adoring subjects and sons. He adopts us! We have received a "spirit of adoption whereby we cry 'Abba! Father!'" while the "Spirit Himself

testifies along with our spirit that we are children of God” (Romans 8:15, 16). All the privileges of sonship and family dignity and likeness become ours. We have an inheritance “incorruptible, undefiled, that does not fade away, reserved in heaven” for us (1 Peter 1:4). We also have an anticipation for the beauty of its glory that makes us sing sincerely, “Fade, fade each earthly joy.”

The natural Son of God, ever Son, eternally the Beloved, is in Himself an eternal outflow of the love of the Father, ever the Father, never absent His effulgence of love; adopted sons of God are so by an act of the gracious covenantal will of God. The eternal Son of God is so by eternal generation and natural relation; redeemed sons of God are so by regeneration and gracious adoption.

As adoption has its legal state as well as its experiential process, so sanctification has its objective reality and its development of subjective transformation. The elect, already set apart in eternity, are set apart as God's own possession in time. In addition, they are made to be zealous of good works. Once under the dominion of the flesh, now by the Spirit we wage war against the flesh.

In the work of Christ as applied to us by the Spirit, the “body of sin” has been destroyed both in its condemning and dominating capacity. By Christ's resurrection, the complete power of death has been broken. In Adam death meant condemnation; in Adam death meant dominating, determinative corruption of soul. Christ's resurrection showed that whatever power death had (as the wages of sin) came to an end; its mastery was terminated both as to damnation and domination. Now we no longer are slaves to sin, its absolute sway has been broken so that we can progressively discern its subtleties and refuse to obey its lusts and present our bodies as instruments of righteousness (Romans 6:4-14). Though we often will find deep distress in the tenacity and metastasy of indwelling sin, nevertheless the law of our minds concurs with the law of God and our confidence is that there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus (Romans 7:21- 8:2).

Sanctification is carried on in light of four factors: the Spirit of God, the truth of God, the example of how perfect holiness operates in producing righteousness, and the clarity of hope. All of the people of God from Adam through the last person saved prior to the glorious appearing of Christ have been, or will be, brought into the kingdom of God by the regenerating work of the Spirit. They have been, or will be, kept by the internal presence and sealing of the Spirit. No such thing exists as a believer without the Spirit. No individual perseveres as a person of faith apart from the indwelling of the Spirit. “He who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Christ” (Romans 8:9). This of factors, however,

expands the scope of sanctification as the revelation of redemption advances throughout the biblical period and as its power expands throughout time.

All sanctification is the immediate operation of the Spirit of God. Sanctification is of the nature, however, that its advance comes in the context of, in the light of, certain spiritually embraced mental perceptions. These impressions in the mind arise from the presence of truthful propositions derived from biblical revelation. Wherever these mental perceptions become a part of one's understanding they become fruitful by the immediate operation of the Spirit of truth in sanctification.

Old Testament believers in increasing proportions had the elements of sanctification available to their understanding; after the coming of Christ, his teaching, his death-burial-resurrection-ascension, the initiating of the new covenant as the determining identification of the people of God, and the writings of the apostles and prophets, the material for sanctification increased exponentially. As the revelation of truth increased, so holy expectations would increase. As each writing of the Old Testament was brought into the body of written truth that governed life and worship for Israel, so the potential for holy living would increase even unto the time of the reign of Christ (Hosea 3:5). With the apostolic writing showing us the things of Christ and delineating all that is freely given to us by God, holy living, the expanse of experiential sanctification, reaches ever higher possibilities.

In addition to that, the coming of Messiah gave both teaching and example of how holiness would produce works of righteousness. We are pointed to Christ's example of humility in the incarnation as a model for how we should relate to other people (Philippians 1:1-5). For true munificence in giving we look to Christ's leaving the infinite riches of heaven for the poverty of a carpenter's shop and the moral filth of a sinful world to give us eternal life (2 Corinthians 8:9). For how we should love one another, we look to Christ's giving Himself up as a sacrifice (Ephesians 5:1, 2). For patience in suffering we look to Christ (1 Peter 2:21). For perseverance in faith even in the cauldron of boiling opposition, we should fix our eyes on Jesus who endured the cross (Hebrews 12:1-3). Believers since the time of Christ have much greater perception of the nature of holy conduct in all situations of life, for we have the undefiled exemplary conduct of the Savior as our model. There are, in fact, many situations in which we can pause and ask ourselves, "What would Jesus do?" The most advanced of Old Testament saints did not have any example of how perfect holiness operates in producing righteousness.

Another contributing factor to increase of sanctification is the far greater clarity of our hope. The resurrection solidifies the reality of eternal life. Believing in it is no longer an

extrapolation from other doctrines, as strong and as compelling as those drawn inferences may be. In reasoning through his plight in conjunction with what he knew of the God he worshipped, Job concluded, "In my flesh I shall see God, whom my eyes shall behold, and not another" (Job 19: 26, 27). David wrote, "And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (Psalm 23:6). Enoch and Elijah were taken bodily into heaven and Daniel was assured that, "You shall rest, and will arise to your inheritance at the end of the days" (Daniel 12:13).

But now, an observable, historically manifested conquering of death in a touchable but transcendentally manageable body, fit for operation in the realm of pure Spirit (1 Corinthians 15:44), has occurred that puts to an end the victory of death. "But now is Christ risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection from the dead" (1 Corinthians 15:20, 21).

Now appeals can be made and hope enforced, not by strong inference, but by historical precedence:

"And our hope for you is steadfast, because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also of the consolation" (2 Corinthians 1:7).

"And raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace toward us in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:6, 7).

"Walk, as you have us for a pattern.... For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to his glorious body, according the working by which he is able even to subdue all things to himself" (Philippians 3:17, 20, 21).

"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; ... therefore put to death your members which are on earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion ... anger, wrath, malice, ... filthy language out of your mouth" (Colossians 3:1, 2, 5, 8).

"Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

"But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; having a good

conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed” (1 Peter 3: 15, 16).

The apostle John brings together for us both adoption and sanctification in the context of the manifest hope that is in Christ due to his resurrection and the promise of his glorious return: “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as he is pure” (1 John 3:1-3).

While we believe, therefore, that only the Spirit of God can sanctify the heart and thus the rightness of conduct, He does this work in conjunction with the expansion of the truth basis of our understanding of God, an example of righteousness built on holiness preeminently and exhaustively in the Lord Jesus Christ, and by the ultimate hope given us by the resurrection of Christ.

One could also argue that the leavening effect of the gospel in world cultures contributes to present sanctification. Complete understanding of doctrine, godly relationships, holy living, and gospel responsibilities were not automatically matured in the immediate post-apostolic (or even apostolic) age. Close attention to the word of truth in Scripture will yield results in personal lives and in cultures until Christ comes again. Many practices and relationships once considered normal and acceptable when brought under the close scrutiny of Scripture will be found wanting; this will yield expansive sanctifying influences.

The powerful influences of Spirit and truth both in times of revival and in the normal flow of Christian life has brought about prison reform, universality of educational opportunity, social action on moral issues, confrontation with systemic racism, a challenge to the epidemic of unwed motherhood and absentee fatherhood, involvement in issues of public health and safety. Other matters also are loaded with moral implications to open a fertile context for the development of personal soul-searching and positive action with sanctifying influences.

We offer this edition of the *Founders Journal* with the hope and prayer that it will bring about increased joy in the grace of God, increased holiness in life, and strengthened convictions about how to glorify God in the church, the world, and in daily thought and action.

—Tom J. Nettles





Raymond Johnson

# From Heirs of Hell to Heirs of Promise

## Chapter XII of the *Second London Confession*: “Of Adoption”

All those that are justified, God vouchsafed, in and for the sake of his only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption, by which they are taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God, have his name put upon them, receive the spirit of adoption, have access to the throne of grace with boldness, are enabled to cry Abba, Father, are pitied, protected, provided for, and chastened by him as by a Father, yet never cast off, but sealed to the day of redemption, and inherit the promises as heirs of everlasting salvation.

(Ephesians 1:5; Galatians 4:4, 5; John 1:12; Romans 8:17; 2 Corinthians 6:18; Revelation 3:12; Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6; Ephesians 2:18; Psalms 103:13; Proverbs 14:26; 1 Peter 5:7; Hebrews 12:6; Isaiah 54:8, 9; Lamentations 3:31; Ephesians 4:30; Hebrews 1:14; Hebrews 6:12)

“Now it may surprise you to learn that in [God’s] efforts to get permanent possession of a soul, He relies on the troughs even more than on the peaks; some of His special favourites have gone through longer and deeper troughs than anyone else. The reason is this. To us a human is primarily food; our aim is the absorption of its will into ours, the increase of our own area of selfhood at its expense. But the obedience which [God] demands of men is quite a different thing. One must face the fact that all the talk about His love for men, and His service

being perfect freedom is not (as one would gladly believe) mere propaganda, but an appalling truth. He really does want to fill the universe with a lot of loathsome little replicas of Himself—creatures whose life, on its miniature scale, will be qualitatively like His own, not because He has absorbed them but because their wills freely conform to His. We want cattle who can finally become food; He wants servants who can finally become sons.”

~ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, (38–39) ~

## What is adoption?

The twelfth chapter of the Second London Confession begins by reminding its readers the saving blessings of the gospel *and* the privileges that accompany it are always received as a whole.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the confession states, “All those that are justified, God vouchsafed, in and for the sake of his only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption.” Believers are graciously justified “for Christ’s sake alone” (LBC 11:1), *and* believers are graciously adopted “for the sake of [the Father’s] only Son Jesus Christ” alone (LBC 12). The “grace of adoption” comes to the believer in Christ alone and for Christ alone.

The believer’s adoption is precisely why God sent His incarnate Son in the first place. The Apostle Paul writes, “God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, *so that* we might receive adoption as sons” (Galatians 4:4–5, emphasis mine). God cares for the believers whom He has justified so much that He sent His Son—His only Son!—to bleed in shame under the crushing weight of sin’s curse. God also gives to them sonship in “the household of God, which is the church of the living God” (1 Timothy 3:14–15). Paul says in Ephesians, “In love [the Father] predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 1:5, emphasis mine). Before the foundation of the world God set his electing gaze on his children as he moved history to save their souls and bring them into his family through the “grace of adoption” (LBC 12).

Because the believer’s adoption into God’s household is the reason the Son of God was sent forth, Jesus became what He was not in order to make what human beings could not become a reality for them (2 Corinthians 5:21). As a result of His accomplishment, those for whom Christ died are adopted as children of God. Paul states, “for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith” (Galatians 3:26). The word “sons” suggests the idea of standing – independent standing. Adoption is a state of freedom (Galatians 3:25). The word “all” indicates that both Jews and Gentiles, men and women, old and young alike are admitted into this new spiritual status as equal partners in the “grace of adoption” by faith

in Christ Jesus (LBC 12). The new birth “in Christ Jesus” is presupposed and assumed as a prerequisite for being named a child of God (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17). The phrase itself is directed to a particular people, not a universal condition of all people regardless of their relationship to Jesus. Not everyone is a son or daughter of God. Thus, John states, “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12).

The Spirit of adoption brings the believer into the household of God as children, “and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:15, 17). Adoption is effectual because of the death of Jesus. It is made possible in this life through the new and living way inaugurated through His flesh. The “grace of adoption” (LBC 12) is gained only through faith in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ because it is through the flesh, i.e. through the death of Jesus (Matthew 27:50–54), that access to God is made possible. As Joseph’s adoption of Jesus fully legitimizes the Savior’s Davidic ancestry, so also God’s adoption of believers as sons and daughters truly grants them eternal access into His Fatherly presence. Jesus’ death actualized the forgiveness of their sins and grants them access to God (Matthew 1:21; 5:8; 26:28).<sup>2</sup> Access to God through the grace of adoption is granted through the torn and bloody and dead flesh of Jesus (cf. John 6:50–58).

What is adoption? Thomas Watson states that adoption is best understood as “taking a stranger into the relation of a son and heir; as Moses was the adopted son of King Pharaoh’s daughter, Exod ii 10, and Esther was the adopted child of her cousin Mordecai. Esth ii 7. Thus God adopts us into the family of heaven.”<sup>3</sup>

What is adoption? Charles Spurgeon heralds,

Adoption is that act of God, whereby men who were by nature the children of wrath, even as others, and were of the lost and ruined family of Adam, are from no reason in themselves, but entirely of the pure grace of God, translated out of the evil and black family of Satan, and brought actually and virtually into the family of God; so that they take his name, share the privileges of sons, and they are to all intents and purposes the actual offspring and children of God.<sup>4</sup>

What is adoption? Adoption is the believer’s New Covenant membership into God’s household.

New Covenant membership is defined in Jeremiah 31:31–34 and the NT explanation (Hebrews 8–10) as those who receive the law (the Ten Words in historical context) written

upon the heart (regeneration), the forgiveness of sins (justification), and the personal knowledge of God (reconciliation). This separates the New Covenant fulfillment of the promised Covenant of Grace from the Abrahamic Covenant which included the organic seed of Abraham who mostly were unregenerate...this means that each New Covenant member is born again by the Holy Spirit into the New Covenant kingdom of God (John 1:12–13, 3:3, 5), that each New Covenant member is justified by faith alone unto the forgiveness of sins (Romans 5:1–2), and that each New Covenant member is effectually reconciled to God as *an adopted child of God* forever (Galatians 4:4–6).<sup>4</sup>

### **Why did they put it here?**

Chapter twelve, “Of Adoption,” in the Second London Confession stands out among confessions of faith because it is one of the first times in the history of the church the doctrine of adoption wins a place of its own.<sup>6</sup> Following the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), five other confessions contain a chapter on adoption: the Savoy Declaration (1658), the Second London Baptist Confession (1689), the Twenty-four Articles of the Presbyterian Synod of England (1890), the Confessional Statement of the United Presbyterian Church of North America (1925), and the Basis of Union of the United Church of Canada (1925). The doctrine of Adoption was not treated as an independent topic of study at the time of the Reformation. Only recently has this aspect of Christian theology been recognized as the royal topic that it really is.<sup>7</sup>

Sandwiched between the doctrine of justification (LBC 11) and the doctrine of sanctification (LBC 13) readers observe that acceptance with God as righteous is prerequisite to adoption which then leads to the believer’s progressive conformity to Christ. By faith the regenerate are the children of God. This observation makes evident that the grace of adoption is not the same as justification or sanctification.<sup>8</sup> The grace of adoption is unique because it accentuates that the adopted children of God “are the sons of God the Father and he sustains to them this highest and most intimate of relationships.”<sup>9</sup> The sons of God the Father experience the awesome joy of knowing they are justified before their Almighty Judge; the awesome joy of knowing they are being healed by their Great Physician—the mortal illness of sin is no longer! But their happiness is derived in the context of a family as adopted children, not as defendants in the courtroom or patients in the waiting room. The qualitative difference is enjoyment of “the liberties and privileges of the children of God” (LBC 12). The doctrine’s placement in the confession makes this unmistakable.

## What does it mean?

If Christians want to understand *who* a believer is, and *why* being a believer is a privilege, they need to appreciate the doctrine of adoption.<sup>10</sup> Because, as Thomas Watson states, “God did not adopt us when we were bespangled with jewels of holiness, and had the angels’ glory upon us; but when we” dwelt in the darkness of sin, had the putrefaction of leprosy in all our parts--that “was the time of his love.”<sup>11</sup>

The Second London Confession teaches that God’s elect are justified by faith in Jesus Christ (Galatians 2:16), and given the right to become God’s children by faith in Jesus Christ (John 1:12). By faith in Jesus Christ they enjoy what the confession identifies as the “liberties and privileges” of God’s own family (LBC 12). Being adopted into God’s own family means the believer now has unmitigated freedom to address God directly, according to Paul, as “Abba! Father!” (Galatians 4:6; cf. Romans 8:15).

Adopted as sons and daughters of God,<sup>12</sup> with all the rights pertaining thereunto, the confession teaches that God, in adopting believers, has “his name put upon them” as they “receive the spirit of adoption” (LBC 12). Regarding the former privilege, the one adopted bears the name of the one who adopted him.<sup>13</sup> The Apostle John writes,

The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, *and I will write on him the name of my God*, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, *and my own new name* (Revelation 3:12, emphasis mine).

The privilege of sons is they bear the name of their Father (Revelation 14:1). Such is the surprising grace of the Father, that He not only has been pleased to save those who did not expect it, but He has even condescended to share His name with them—“Yet you, O Lord, are in the midst of us, and we are called *by your name*” (Jeremiah 14:9, emphasis mine). John contrasts the benevolence of the Adopter with the adopted when he writes, “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are” (1 John 3:1; cf. Isaiah 56:5). John could not get over his adoption, “and he never will. Eternity will not exhaust its marvel.”<sup>14</sup>

Regarding the latter privilege, the one adopted is sanctified by the one who has adopted him.<sup>15</sup> The Apostle Peter writes,

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers

of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire (2 Peter 1:3–4).

The blessing is not in name only; adoption makes the Father’s children honorable. With the name comes an appropriate heart attitude and a true, loving relationship (Romans 8:15).

Reception of the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of adoption (Romans 8:15), gives believers “access to the throne of grace with boldness” (LBC 12) where they experience the paternal care of their Heavenly Father. The confession says believers are, first, “pitied” by the Father who sympathizes with their weaknesses (Psalm 103:13). Second, they are “protected” by the Father who will guard them and keep them in His name (John 17:11). Third, they are “provided for” by the Father who knows what they need before they ask (Matthew 6:32). Fourth, they are “chastened by [the Father]...yet never cast off” because their Father “disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives” (Heb 12:6). Sixth, they “are sealed to the day of redemption, and inherit the promises as heirs of everlasting salvation.” The Father assures believers they have a great and priceless inheritance which does not rust, cannot be stolen, and is reserved for them by himself. Peter writes,

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time (1 Peter 1:3–4).

The Father is lavish in His gifts to His adopted children. Believers will experience the benefits of receiving all that He has provided for them because “all those that are justified, God vouchsafed, in and for the sake of His only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption” (LBC 12).

The doctrine of adoption teaches believers not only what they receive—sonship—but also what the Father gives—a new name and a new nature. All Christians are the people of God – never forgotten by God or His church even if they are forgotten or abused or taken advantage of by their own biological family on earth. The doctrine of adoption teaches that theology trumps biology.

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## NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> This observation comes from Chad VanDixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A Reader’s Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2014), 172.

<sup>2</sup> This is made explicit in Hebrews 10:20.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity* (Carlisle, PA, 1978), 232–233.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *The Lost Sermons of C.H. Spurgeon: His Earliest Outlines and Sermons Between 1851 and 1854*, Vol. 1, ed. Christian T. George (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2016), 71.

<sup>5</sup> Fred A. Malone, “Biblical Hermeneutics & Covenant Theology,” in *Covenant Theology: A Baptist Distinctive*, ed. Earl M. Blackburn (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2013), 80–81. Emphasis mine.

<sup>6</sup> This observation comes from Garner’s work on adoption. See David B. Garner, *Sons in the Son: The Riches and Reach of Adoption in Christ*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2016), 26. Careful readers will notice that WCF 12 and LBC 12 are identical statements.

<sup>7</sup> VanDixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A Reader’s Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*, 171. He notes that the doctrine of adoption has often been lost from view since the time that this chapter was written by both the framers of the WCF and the LBC.

<sup>8</sup> Harris notes that adoption is “not the same as justification or regeneration.” He laments that too “frequently it has been regarded as simply an aspect of justification or as another way of stating the privilege conferred by regeneration.” John Murray, *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprint 2015), 139.

<sup>9</sup> Murray, *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied*, 147.

<sup>10</sup> Timothy Keller, *Galatians For You* (The Good Book Company, 2015), 89.

<sup>11</sup> Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, 235.

<sup>12</sup> Though adopted as sons and daughters, believers must consider in what sense they are the sons of God. Believers are “not sons of God in so high a sense as Christ is, who is God’s own Son, his proper son, his only begotten Son.” John Gill, *A Body of Doctrinal Divinity*, 2:821. Rather, believers are the sons of God by adoption.

<sup>13</sup> Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, 233.

<sup>14</sup> Murray, *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied*, 144.

<sup>15</sup> Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, 233.

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# The Practice of All True Holiness

## Chapter XIII, Paragraph 1 of the *Second London Confession*: “Of Sanctification”

They who are united to Christ, effectually called, and regenerated, having a new heart and a new spirit created in them through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, are also farther sanctified, really and personally, through the same virtue, by His Word and Spirit dwelling in them; the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed, and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified, and they more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces, to the practice of all true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.

### **The gospel events constitute the fountainhead of our sanctification.**

For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2).

Lest anyone should think that sanctification is our contribution to the “working out” of our salvation, the confession grounds it in the gospel events. We are now in union with our Lord and Savior. It was God who called us to Christ, with a calling that worked spiritual resurrection in our hearts. And it was God who did what needed to be done to provide a righteousness not our own, a justification which in no way depended on our endeavors. The chief event of history is the cross. Without the death of our Lord all would have been lost, the eternal purpose of God, the renewal of creation, the renewal of the race now, without the Lord's intervention, hopelessly careening toward only eternal damnation and nothing more, all lost. But Christ appeared and everything is changed. And, as the Old



Testament prophets looked forward to His appearing in hope, so we look back to His salvific work. Our hearts fill, and our mouths open with praise to such a God who would in mercy provide what we never could have accomplished.

In the same way, though we are different now, having a renewed will, we can make no claim to merit other than that which comes from Christ. The sanctification process, like justification, is the work of God, and it is God who must have the glory and honor of it. All of our salvation was won by the death of our Lord on the cross. The satisfaction of divine justice, the application of saving grace, and the final state of glory all depend on what the Lord Jesus Christ accomplished by His death on behalf of His people. He works righteousness in them, as He has worked righteousness for them, but that work of righteousness in them is His work, even though, by union with Christ, we come to own it. Thus the sanctification won is now *our* sanctification but Christ is surely the author and finisher of it. Indeed, Paul calls Christ our sanctification (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:30–31).

The Hebrew word *kadosh* means “separate.” To be holy is to be separated to the Lord and to His purpose to save a people for His eternal glory. The pots and pans used in the tabernacle’s priestly work were separated to the purposes of the Lord. They were not for ordinary use. Our Lord is the truly holy one of God. He has come into the world and lived a life of true separation, a life unique in its pristine character. Just as His righteousness is the ground of our justification, so His righteous obedience is the ground of our growth in obedience. Without His atoning work there would be no hope of sanctification in this life or glorification in the next. There is no independent righteousness, either personal, or of departed saints, which becomes the substance of our holiness. It is all of Christ.

### **Sanctification is progressive.**

Now this I say, and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds (Ephesians 4:17).

This is not to say that sanctification may be represented on a graph as an ascending line of progress with inevitable percentages of growth, year by year. Though it is God’s work, it varies as the renewed man engages his three great enemies, this world and its siren’s song, Satan and his wiles, and the flesh with its strong inclinations. We grow in grace but in a fallen world, that growth is uneven in its progress. Nevertheless it is progress. If one could have a bird’s eye view of the history of our lives he would see, that in spite of failures both great and small, there may be discerned a genuine change in the thinking and

affections of the true believer in Christ. Transformation that is clearly discernable would be seen, and it would not be hard to do so.

The progress of the believer demands a ministry of God's Word. He must hear the command of God to turn from sin to righteousness and obey. But the disciple of the Lord does disobey. And so the life lived is one lived hearing the Word as commandment, or often as rebuke, but responding to the Word as the normative guide for all things. Thus the disciple either hears, and engages the foe, gaining victories by faith in Christ, or when disobedient, hears the Word and repents with a will to more consistent fidelity. He agonizes over the presence of sin and, by faith, hopes for greater love for the one who died to take his sins away. Such love for Christ holds a sure promise of growth and the blessing of seeing more and more transformation. He is moved to a more successful experience of self-examination leading to more Christ-likeness.

Again and again, the Scriptures speak of our *walk* in the Lord. Our life in Christ is like a journey. There is a destination. We are to grow in Christ, and just as Christ is presented to us as the one in whom "...the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily," we are assured that we have been "filled" in Him. (Colossians 2: 6–10) We cannot think that we are left by divine providence to stumble along. No, faith in the one who is perfect in righteousness proves that we have all that we need, in Him. He is not only an all-sufficient Savior but is an all-sufficient sustainer as well. Therefore we grow; we change. We are not merely told that we *should* grow, that we *should* change. We actually do change because this process is an integral part of our salvation. This too was won by Christ's death on the cross. Paradoxically, we must be told to obey. We must be called to repent when we sin. But, by God's grace, we will have growth, and one day we will see that what was won by the death of Christ was a sure transformation ending in full glorification.

### **Our sanctification is both forensic and experiential.**

But you were washed, you were sanctified... (1 Corinthians 6:11b). Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous (1 John 3:7).

Here are two great truths. We, like the vessels of the tabernacle, have been declared to be holy. We have been separated to the purposes of God. We have been delivered from the kingdom of darkness, and cleansed by the Lord. We have become citizens of the kingdom of God's son. And, though we are holy, separate, and cleansed by the Lord, we still have remaining sin in us.

We have asserted the Christocentric character of the life of holiness. We did not originate this holiness; it is Christ's and was won by His death on the cross. But the holiness that is worked in us, and worked out by us, is real in our experience. It is not merely the declaration of God. He has declared us holy as He has declared us to be righteous. But the process of sanctification involves the life lived. That means that there will be a struggle for the kingdom to be manifested in the way we live. The struggle will be real, and sadly, it will be uneven in its zeal and effect. But the struggle will produce victories that are genuine, victories that are real in our experience.

### **Sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit.**

But I say walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh (Galatians 5:16).

Salvation is the work of our triune God. The Father chose us in eternity. The Son came in the history of this world to die in our place. And, the application of that eternal choice, and that historical atonement, is wrought by the Spirit in our experience, whenever that may be. Here again is the truth of God's work on our behalf as the sole ground of our holiness. The choice was the Father's, and we had no contribution to make. The death was our Lord Jesus Christ's, and we had no part in it. And, the life we live, by the grace of God, is the work of God's Spirit.

We lay dead before the Spirit brought us to life. We are now alive to the Lord but the righteousness that is made manifest is only ours by grace. It is the work of the Holy Spirit, and the proof of that work is evident as the believer grows in imitation of Christ, as the believer grows in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. In the end those may be what we have practiced, but they are not ours to boast about. God's Spirit was at work in us.

There is a difference between what may be said of us in our relationship to the eternal choice of the Father, the cross of Christ, and the work of the Spirit on our behalf. The Father's work was done before we were called to exist. And although many, who were saved by the death of our Lord, lived long before He came to die, it may be said that, whether in the age of anticipation, or in the present age, His death was for those who were found to be lying dead in sins, helpless and without a will to serve the Lord. The work of the Spirit changes that. Our wills are renewed, and as Charles Wesley wrote, "his eye diffused a quickening ray, the dungeon flamed with light, my chains fell off, my heart

was free, I rose, went forth and followed thee.” This was the Spirit’s work at the start and continues to be the Spirit’s work throughout all of life.

### **The holy life is a life of struggle, of mortification and renewal.**

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you (Colossians 3:5a).

Here the framers of the confession go to what should always be the heart of experience, the death and resurrection of our Lord. Again and again the apostles command us to put to death those things that are contrary to both law and gospel. This assumes that we have a renewed will, and are able to say *no* to sin. We find ourselves sinners who still often sin because we are not yet made perfect, but we also find ourselves to be followers of Christ, who when they recognize sin as sin can say, “by faith in Christ, I will have no part in that!” Willful sin is more and more seen as the great trap which once was the essence of our life, but now is to be mortified.

In this, the apostolic example abounds. This is very clear in Paul’s letter to the Colossians. We are commanded to remember that Christ’s death was His victory over sin, and death, and hell. He overcame, offering His pristine life of obedience, and defeated all the enemies of God and humankind. Therefore, since He is victorious we, now united with Him by the goodness of the Lord, are able to say *no* to all those things that He overcame. We are able, by faith in Him, to agonize over the horror of sin against our holy God, and by faith to reject willful disobedience. Thus, sins like sexual immorality, covetousness, malice, and slanderous talk are identified for what they are and rejected as not consonant with the righteousness of Christ.

This is no claim to perfection. We are being sanctified. We are not yet glorified. But the follower of Christ, though he may allow even great licentiousness in himself far too often, cannot live comfortably in such a state. He must say, “Christ suffered for me. His suffering was beyond comprehension. Such love shown to me at the cross cannot allow me to be false to Him. I will take His forgiveness, and by grace I will say *no* to those things that the Word of God reveals to be sin. How can I stubbornly say that His death is of so little consequence that I can persist in sinning against my Lord? No, we should pray “Lord, work such thankfulness in my heart that I will rise to meet the foe and conquer in the name of Christ!”

And, we are exhorted to remember that Christ has been raised from the dead. And we remember that, in baptism, we have confessed the truth and power of His resurrection.

For that reason, we look to the power of His resurrection life dwelling in us by God's Spirit. We begin to see the universality of grace, recognizing that barbarians, Scythians, enslaved men, free men, in fact all kinds of men, called from every race and tribe and nation, are being joined together for the eternal glory of God. We learn that compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience are the sort of qualities we seek. We forgive as we have been forgiven. We remember the selfless love of Christ's death, and begin to live in the extraordinary power of his resurrection life.

### **The process of sanctification is essential to true salvation.**

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14).

The whole of the confession's statement on sanctification mirrors the teaching of the word of God. But the last sentence of the first paragraph is a direct quote from Scripture. "Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness ...*without which no one will see the Lord* (Hebrews 12:14b).

Whether one translates *hagiasmos* as "holiness" or simply "sanctification," it is clear that we are not claiming that the progress of sanctification *in this life* leads to perfection, in this life. The perfection will come to us in the glorified state. That is certain. But it is also the final tense of a salvation that comes by grace alone. Thus the confession makes clear that sanctification is "imperfect in this life."

So we are not hoping to see perfection on this side of heaven. But we must see sanctification. We must see holiness. To be without *holiness*, (a sanctification process that is real and produces the fruit of the Holy Spirit) is to fail to see the Lord in at least two ways.

The Lord's words to Nicodemus are instructive here. To have anything less than a miraculous intervention of God, anything less than the new birth, the new begetting that can only come from above, is to fail to **see** the kingdom of God. We do not truly perceive what the kingdom is, or what its blessings are for those who are the objects of God's mercy in Christ, until we have an awakening that can only come by the miraculous work of God's Spirit. What the Father purposed in eternity, and what the Son accomplished in time, become ours in experience by the Spirit. We can see much of that blessing even in this life. But to see the kingdom, because we have been born again, means more than that

we begin to understand something of the mercy of God toward us. It also means that we, by God's grace, come to see the kingdom because we are now *in* the kingdom. We have been transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God's dear Son. More than our understanding has been touched. We also are in a new state of being. We were dead; we are now alive. All is new. There is a new realm to be lived in for those who know the Lord.

In the same way, we might be tempted to think that to have holiness is only to see God as people who now have the ability to understand his ways. That is indeed true. But it is also true, and the context in *Hebrews* demands it, that when the writer says that without holiness, "no one will see the Lord," he means that not only can we not understand God's character, and the working out of His purposes, he also means that since there is no salvific reality in the life, that person will fail to see God at all. He will not be with him eternally. Just as works are the temporal evidence of true salvation, so holiness in experience is the necessary accompaniment of what began with new birth and ends in glorification and perfection in heaven. There will be no temporal comprehension of God's truth without holy movement, without a process of sanctification. And, there will certainly be no final glory without it.

God's Word teaches us that our salvation, as we have said, is the work of the triune God. It is not a truncated proclamation of the benefits of Christ's atoning work without reference to the eternal work of God and the work of the Holy Spirit in our experience. That is not to say that our preaching should not be Christocentric. It should be. We preach Christ and Him crucified. Lost sinners need to hear about Christ and His cross. They need to hear that His death and resurrection was as Paul said, "...for our sins." We are not called to preach the eternal work of the Father to poor lost sinners as the essence of gospel truth. We are not called to preach the work of the Holy Spirit or some deviant version of that work. Preaching the gospel is not taking the lost the words, "let me tell you how God has changed my life." No we preach Christ.

Our faith is not in the eternal purpose of the Father. But the work of the Father is an essential part of our salvation, though we may not understand it well at first. Our faith is not in the Holy Spirit or in His work in the history of our lives. But the work of the Holy Spirit in our experience is an essential part of our salvation, though we may not understand it at the beginning. Unless that work takes place no one will see the Lord.

But suppose that the professor of faith in Christ despairs of seeing evidence of that work in his life, and wonders what he should do. We should tell him not to look to himself, though

self-examination is good, but to look to Christ. It is after all the work of the Holy Spirit to reveal Christ to us, and we are thrown back upon Him again and again as we see our deficits. That too is part of the sanctification process. We should encourage ourselves and our brothers and sisters in Christ to say with Paul, “Are we to continue in sin so that grace may abound? By no means!” (Romans 6:1b–2a).

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

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Tom Hicks

# The Imperfections of Our Sanctification

## Chapter XIII, Paragraph 2 of the *Second London Confession*: “Of Sanctification”

The word “sanctification” carries several different meanings in the Scriptures. Sometimes it refers to being set apart from common to sacred use (Exodus 13:2). Other times, it refers to association with symbols and elements of worship, such as the blood of bulls and goats (Hebrews 9:18–22). But in the soteriological sense, “Sanctification is the real change in man from the sordidness of sin to the purity of God’s image. Ephesians 4:22–24.”<sup>1</sup> Soteriological sanctification has two parts: definitive sanctification and progressive sanctification. At the moment the Spirit unites the elect sinner to Christ in his effectual calling, he is definitively sanctified, which means that he is regenerated and justified. In definitive sanctification, the sinner dies to the dominion of sin. He is set free from the dominion of sin’s curse (in justification) and he is set free from the dominion of sin’s power (in regeneration). Though the dominion of sin is broken at his regeneration and justification, sin is by no means completely eliminated. G.I. Williamson puts it well:

[In definitive sanctification] The dominion of sin is broken, though the presence of sin is not entirely eliminated. Just as penicillin may break a fever, thus destroying the dominion of a disease, and yet some time elapses before every trace of the disease is eliminated, so it is with sin. Just as the Allied armies invaded Europe and destroyed the threat of Hitler’s hope



of world dominion, and yet required much more time to eradicate every vestige of it, so it is with sin. Sin no longer commands the heart. The main lines of communication have been destroyed. The control center is now in the hands of God. But the alien force still carries on harassment of all kind with all the skill, cunning and desperation of a defeated foe.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, while definitive sanctification destroys the power of sin in regeneration, it does not destroy the remnants of sin in the believer. That is why progressive sanctification is necessary so that the power of sin is more and more mortified (or killed) and the power of holiness is more and more vivified (or made alive). The following article will explain how the biblical and confessional doctrine of progressive sanctification entails imperfection, or remaining sin, in the believer.

According to William Ames, whose volume, *The Marrow of Theology*, was highly influential on the Reformed confessional tradition, progressive sanctification is a threefold process. First, negatively speaking, it involves purging of the “filthiness, corruption, or stain of sin.”<sup>3</sup> “Let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God” (2 Corinthians 7:1). Second, positively speaking, “Its end is the purity of God’s image.”<sup>4</sup> The Holy Spirit infuses and imparts more and more holiness into the believer, conforming him more and more to the good law of God and thus to the image of Christ. “But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing” (James 1:25). Third, “The end is called a new and divine creature.”<sup>5</sup> The final goal of progressive sanctification is renewal after the image of Christ, restoring the image of God that was marred by the fall, which is only finally attained at glorification. Ephesians 4:24 says believers are to “put on the new self, created after the likeness of God.” Progressive sanctification, like definitive sanctification is imperfect.

## **Versions of Perfectionistic Sanctification**

Despite the biblical teaching of the imperfection of sanctification, many have taught that sanctification can be perfect in this life. There are primarily two versions of perfectionistic sanctification, the first is Antinomian and the second is Legalistic.

### ***The Antinomians***

Antinomian versions of sanctification viewed believers as wholly sanctified by Christ’s perfect holiness, received by faith alone. According to Robert Shaw, “Antinomians

maintain, that believers are sanctified only by the holiness of Christ being imputed to them, and that there is no inherent holiness infused into them, or required of them.”<sup>6</sup> The antinomians collapsed sanctification into justification and failed to distinguish properly between the two.

The result is that they taught all believers are both perfectly just and perfectly holy, regardless of their actual and personal holiness. They claimed that men may be saved and holy without regard to any moral transformation.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the Antinomians held to a form of “perfectionism,” believing that they did not need to exert effort to grow in inherent holiness, since they were already perfectly holy through the imputed holiness of Christ.

### *The Legalists*

Perfectionism has also been expressed in versions of legalism. In essence, perfectionists said that to be sanctified is to be perfectly and inherently holy. The legalists collapsed justification into sanctification, without admitting degrees of sanctification, insisting those who are actually sanctified are free from the remnants of sin in their own persons. According to David Dickson, “The Papists, Socinians, Quakers, and Anabaptists affirm and maintain a perfect inherent holiness in this life.” Today, the Higher Life, Kewicks movement, and even No-Lordship Dispensationalism teach a kind of perfectionism, calling for believers not only to come to Christ for salvation, but also to be sanctified once-and-for-all through “total surrender” or “letting go and letting God.”

Herman Bavinck says that the proponents of perfectionism, “degrade the moral law and make a distinction between mortal and venial sins, or between committing and harboring sin, and similarly between earthly and heavenly, relative and absolute perfection.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, legalistic perfectionism did not affirm the necessity of the absolute purity of perfected Christians; rather, it affirmed a kind of purity in perfect Christians, while still admitting certain kinds of flaws. Correspondingly, legalistic perfectionism distinguished between two kinds of Christians. Ordinary Christians are not yet perfect in this life. But other sanctified Christians have arrived at perfection.

## **Theological Problems with Perfectionism**

Perfectionism has a number of problems. Herman Bavinck’s work, *Reformed Dogmatics*, outlines the problems with the perfectionistic heresies. The central problem with

perfectionism and thus with both legalism and antinomianism is that it divides what ought to be understood as united.

*First, the moral law of God is one and cannot be divided.*

James 2:10 says, “Whoever keeps the whole law, but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.” This moral law of God remains in didactic force for all believers as a single whole, and to sin against any part or degree of God’s law is to sin against it all. Thus, legalistic perfectionists are wrong to teach that one may be relatively perfect without being absolutely perfect, or that one may be perfect while committing sin as long as one does not harbor sin.<sup>10</sup>

*Second, Christ is one and cannot be divided.*

The Lord Jesus Christ purchased a whole salvation for all of His elect bride, and it is impossible to possess some of His merits without possessing all of them. Thus, the antinomian perfectionists are wrong to teach that one may be positionally perfectly holy without any accompanying inherent holiness. Jesus died not only to free us from the guilt of sin, but also from its power. Similarly, the legalistic perfectionists are wrong to teach, as the Methodists do, that one may be justified in Christ, without yet being sanctified. Union with Christ brings the whole Christ and all of His benefits to the elect.<sup>11</sup>

*Third, the nature of saving faith is one; therefore, it both justifies and sanctifies.*

Both perfectionistic antinomianism and legalism fail to grasp the Bible’s teaching about the nature of saving faith. Perfectionistic antinomianism teaches that faith merely passively receives Christ’s holiness, but that it does not actively “strive ... for the holiness without which none will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14). Similarly, the perfectionistic legalism found in Methodism and Keswick teaching, for example, teaches that one may be justified by faith, but then only later sanctified. This view fails to understand that saving faith simultaneously passively receives Christ’s righteousness for justification, but also actively pursues Christ and His good commandments for sanctification. Hebrews 4 explains that true faith is a faith of “rest” (Hebrews 4:3) as well as a faith that seeks to “strive” (Hebrews 4:11).<sup>12</sup>

*Fourth, the Christian life is one and cannot be divided.*

Legalists deny that any Christians are being sanctified and guided by the whole moral law of God, since they divide it and make distinctions such as relative and absolute perfection. Antinomians, likewise, deny that any Christian is to be guided by the moral law of God. If the moral law of God, however, is not the guide for the believer at the moment he first believes, then he will have to substitute some other ethic derived from philosophy or from the state or society or culture around him. Cultural trends will tend to dominate his personal ethic. But the Christian life is whole, governed from the first moment by God's good law, not divided, or borrowed from the world.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, every version of perfectionism, which denies the imperfection of our sanctification in this life, must divide what God has united, but God has joined all of these things in Christ.

### **The Teaching of the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith 13.2 About Imperfect Sanctification**

The Second London Baptist Confession of 1677/89 speaks of the imperfection of sanctification in chapter 13, Of Sanctification, paragraph 2. It reads:

This sanctification is throughout, in the whole man (1 Thessalonians 5:23), yet imperfect in this life; there abideth still some remnants of corruption in every part (Romans 7:18–23), whence ariseth a continual and irreconcilable war; the flesh lusting against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh (Galatians 5:17, 1 Peter 2:11).

This paragraph is constructed to confront the false doctrines of perfectionism and to relate the biblical teaching about the imperfect nature of Christian sanctification. The Presbyterian Westminster Confession of Faith, the Congregationalist Savoy Declaration, and the Second London Baptist Confession are all identical in this paragraph. Consider the three main elements of this paragraph, which teach the imperfection of sanctification.

*First, notice that “sanctification is throughout, in the whole man” (2LCF 13.2).*

That is to say that we cannot merely be sanctified in our minds. It would be wrong to think that right affirmations of doctrine alone are sanctification without sincere faith in those doctrines that leads to genuine affection for Christ and godly behavior. Neither are

we merely sanctified in our hearts, as though feelings or affections of the soul, divorced from rational thought and holy conduct is true sanctification. But neither are we merely sanctified in our behaviors as though outward bodily change is true sanctification. Each of these errors has perfectionistic tendencies, since it is quite possible to hold orthodox doctrine on paper, or to feel great emotions for God in worship, or to be outwardly behaviorally moral and thus to think of oneself as perfect because of these partial achievements.

True sanctification involves the whole man, which includes mind, heart, and will, but also body and soul, and the whole Christian life and experience. The Bible says, “Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it” (1 Thessalonians 1:23–24). According to William Ames, “Although the whole man partakes of this grace, it is first and most appropriately in the soul and later progresses to the body, inasmuch as the body of the man is capable of the same obedience to the will of God as the soul. In the soul, this grace is found first and most appropriately in the will whence it passes to other faculties according to the order of nature.”<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the first step to undermining perfectionistic doctrines of sanctification is to affirm that sanctification is in the whole man, that it is not divided, but that it immediately upon conversion involves the whole life of the believer.

***Second, notice that sanctification is “imperfect in this life; [and] there abideth still some remnants of corruption in every part” (2LCF 13.2).***

When this says that sanctification in this life is “imperfect,” it does not mean that sanctification is defective, but that it is incomplete. That is, sin remains in the hearts of true believers. William Ames, who expressed the confessional theology of the seventeenth century, rightly says:

Because sanctification is imperfect while we live here as children, all believers have, as it were, a double form – that of sin and that of grace, for perfect sanctification is not found in this life, except in the dreams of some fanatics ... Yet all that are truly sanctified tend [or grow] to perfection... . Sin or the corrupted part which remains in the sanctified is called in the Scripture the Old man, outward man, the members, and the body of sin. Grace or the renewed part is called the New man, the spirit, the mind, and the like.<sup>15</sup>

Consider the following lines of biblical evidence that sin remains in the believer.

The Bible teaches that no one is without sin. In the Old Testament, 1 Kings 8:46 says, “There is no one who does not sin.” Note the universal negative, “no one,” which includes believers and unbelievers. Proverbs 20:9 says, “Who can say, ‘I have made my heart pure; I am clean from my sin?’” The obvious answer to this rhetorical question is, “no one can say that.” Ecclesiastes 7:20 says, “Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.” This verse teaches that absolute righteousness entails perfect sinlessness, and it denies that anyone is righteous in this sense, which is why the imputed righteousness of Christ is necessary for justification. In the New Testament, 1 John 1:8 says, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” Notice the first person plural “we,” which includes the author. John, the holy Apostle, says that if he denies sin in himself, then he would be deceiving himself and he would not even be a believer. James 3:2 says, “For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man.” The context shows that “stumbling” refers to sin. Therefore, the Bible in both Testaments says that no one is without sin.<sup>16</sup>

The Scriptures also teach that believers should ask God to forgive them of their sins, which shows that true believers have remaining sin. In the Lord’s Prayer, which is Christ’s example to all Christians of how to pray, He says to ask God to “forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt 6:12). Ordinary Christians are to pray and ask God for forgiveness, which shows that they have remaining sin. In 1 John 1:9, John says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” John assumes that Christians will have sins that they need to confess, and he explains that if faithful penitent Christians confess their sins, then God will forgive them. Of course, the forgiveness of sins mentioned here is not for justification, since all of the believer’s sins were forgiven in justification at the moment he first believed. Rather, this forgiveness is twofold. First, when the believer confesses his sins, the sense of God’s forgiveness in justification terminates again on the conscience, and he experiences God’s forgiveness. But second, a believer’s sins disrupt his communion with God in sanctification, and so he needs to ask for forgiveness to have a clear conscience and to restore faithful communion with God as his Father.<sup>17</sup>

A classic passage refuting perfectionism is found in Philippians 3:12–15. Paul says:

12. Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward

to what lies ahead, 14. I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. 15. Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.

In verse 12, Paul plainly says that he is not “already perfect.” He is pressing on in Christ and seeking holiness in Christ, but he is not “perfect.” There’s an important play on words here. In verse 12, Paul says that he is not perfect. But then in verse 15, Paul says that he is “mature,” which is the same Greek word for perfect. William Hendricksen explains, “Judaizers may regard themselves as being *teleioi* (perfect), but it is we who are the real *teleioi* (mature individuals), for the *teleioi* are exactly the ones who in full awareness of their own imperfection reach for the goal.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, perfect Christians realize they are not perfect, but they want to be.<sup>19</sup>

A question often arises with respect to certain passages of Scripture, which many believe teach the doctrine of perfection. For example, the Bible commands us to be perfect. Jesus says, “You therefore must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Of course, this is nothing other than the command of the law, and the law’s commands never imply an ability to keep them (Romans 3:19–20). The law of God never requires anything less than perfection, even for the believer. Jesus does not say that the Spirit will make us perfect, or that we have the ability to be perfect, only that perfection is the standard for all.<sup>20</sup>

Other passages say that those who are born of God do not sin. For example, 1 John 3:6 says, “No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him.” 1 John 3:8–9 says, “Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God.” But John is speaking of the definitive sanctification that happens at the new birth, not progressive sanctification. He explicitly references the new birth in verse 9. John is only saying what Paul says in Romans 6:6–14, that sin has no dominion over those who are united to Christ, who have died to sin and have been raised to walk in Christ’s life by virtue of their regeneration. John is in no way denying that sin remains in those who are being progressively sanctified, which is clear from what he says in the first chapter of the letter. In 1 John 1:8, he says, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” 1 John 2:1 says, “If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous,” clearly showing that believers can sin, and that they have an advocate.

*Third notice that the confession says that there “ariseth a continual and irreconcilable war” (2 LCF 13.2).*

Though sin remains in every true believer, no true believer is at peace with his sin. He makes war against it, seeking to put it to death and to grow in holiness from love to Christ and joy in Him for so great a salvation. Of course, if someone thinks he is perfectly holy (either objectively in Christ or subjectively in himself), there is no need for a war at all. G.I. Williamson said:

As Murray has rightly said, ‘There is a total difference between surviving sin and reigning sin.’ It is impossible that a true believer will rest content with his sin, indulging it freely, turning the grace of God into lasciviousness. Only if we ‘through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body shall [we] live’ (Rom 8:13). And it is a noteworthy fact that the greater progress one makes in sanctification, the more he will be distressed by the sin that is yet present with him (Rom 7:24).<sup>21</sup>

There is a war in the heart of the believer because, contrary to legalistic and antinomian forms of perfectionism, he has not yet been completely sanctified in mind, heart, or will. William Ames says:

Two things should be noted. First, a spiritual war is continually waged between these parts [the corrupted part and the renewed part].... Second, there is a daily renewal of repentance. The flesh which remains in the regenerate is not only in the inciting and sensory appetite, but in the will and reason itself (1 Thess 5:23). Flesh or inordinate desire [concupiscentia] is the true reason for sin in the regenerate themselves (Rom 7).<sup>22</sup>

The Apostle Paul clearly teaches that there is an ongoing war in the soul of the believer. Galatians 5:16–17 says, “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.” In other words, the flesh wars against the Spirit and the Spirit wars against the flesh, contrary to all forms of perfectionism.

In Romans 7, Paul says much the same thing that he says in Galatians 5. In Romans 7:14, he says, “For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin,” meaning that Adam’s sin sold him under the curse of sin, and that Paul, the believer, is still experiencing the effects of Adam’s first sin because sin remains in Paul. Paul goes on to describe the war that exists in the heart of every believer in verses 15–23:



15. I do not understand my own actions For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. 16. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law that it is good. 17. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. 18. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. 19. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. 20. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it but sin that dwells in me. 21. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. 22. For I delight in the law of God in my inner being, 23. but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

Paul longs to obey God's law but does not have the ability yet to keep it perfectly. The dominion of sin has been destroyed, but the remnants of sin are still in his heart. And he hates the sin in his heart. And he fights it and makes war against it.<sup>23</sup> The Bible everywhere speaks of the need of the believer to fight against sin and for holiness. And we fight by the means of grace, the Word, the sacrament, the prayers, and the fellowship of the saints. As we give ourselves to these means by faith, we see more of Christ and His great redemptive love, and we grow in the knowledge of Christ and love for Christ, and we have the power to keep His commandments more and more. And we must exert effort as we fight this war. The Apostle Peter is very clear: "Make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue" (2 Peter 1:5). This war requires effort. And the writer of the Hebrews says, we must "Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). This war requires striving. The armies of Satan have been broken, and the victory is ours, but we must still fight the remaining skirmishes with diligent effort to overcome.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the perfectionistic teachings of both Legalism and Antinomianism comport neither with the Word of God nor with the Reformed confessional tradition. The Bible teaches that sin remains in the hearts of believers, that the dominion of sin has been destroyed, but that all sin has not yet been eradicated. This means that believers should not expect perfection on this side of heaven, though they should certainly long for it and strive for it. This doctrine of Christian imperfection explains what sincere Christians feel in their hearts, that they are not yet perfectly holy, that they must continually run to Christ for grace because of their remaining sin, receive the comforts of His promises, and renew

their repentance every day, being conformed more and more to the image of Christ, and learning to keep His good commandments more and more for His great glory.

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## NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), 168.

<sup>2</sup> G.I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: For Study Classes* (Philadelphia, PA: P&R, 1964), 115.

<sup>3</sup> Ames, *Marrow*, 169.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Shaw, *The Reformed Faith: An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Fearn, Ross-Shire, Scotland, UK: Christian Focus, 1973), 194.

<sup>7</sup> Ernest F. Kevan, *The Grace of Law: A Study in Puritan Theology* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1993), 23.

<sup>8</sup> David Dickson, *Truth's Victory Over Error: A Commentary of the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2007), 79.

<sup>9</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 263.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, 263–264.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 264.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 264–265.

<sup>14</sup> Ames, *Marrow*, 169.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 170–171.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>18</sup> William Hendricksen, *Philippians, New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1974), n. 176.

<sup>19</sup> For more exegesis of this passage and for a classic and thoroughgoing refutation of perfectionism, see B.B. Warfield, *Studies in Perfectionism* (Grand Rapids, MI: P&R, 1980).

<sup>20</sup> John Broadus, *Commentary on Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Classics, 1990), 124.

<sup>21</sup> Williamson, *The Westminster Confession*, 115.

<sup>22</sup> Ames, *Marrow*, 171.

<sup>23</sup> For an excellent exposition of this passage, see Robert Haldane, *Romans*, Geneva Series of Commentaries (Carlisle PA: Banner, 1996), 290–299. The view that Paul is speaking as an unbeliever, or as a representative of Israel, rather than a believer is gaining popularity today. But this was not the position of Protestant Reformers, the Puritans or of the Reformed confessional tradition on this passage.

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Steve Weaver

# **Our Battle with Sin**

## **Chapter XIII, Paragraph 3**

### **of the *Second London Confession*: “Of Sanctification”**

Over the Christmas holidays, I have been fighting an ongoing battle to recover my home study. For the past two years it has collected all the extra tools, home repair items, and especially stacks of books, papers, and periodicals. At times it has seemed like a losing battle. Storage bins were purchased, bags of trash have been carried off, periodicals and books have been organized and shelved. At present only a couple of stacks of loose papers remain in my study's floor. It is very encouraging, but the vestiges of the struggle remain. I know that the battle to keep my study usable will be a lifelong struggle. There has been progress, but more work needs to be done and new battles will need to be fought daily.

Likewise, the battle for holiness is a lifelong battle. The believer's sanctification progresses surely, but slowly. Paragraph 3 of chapter 13 of the Confession begins with a reference to war. The war spoken of is the “continual and irreconcilable war” between the flesh and the Spirit mentioned in paragraph 2 of the same chapter.

In this war, the remaining corruption may greatly prevail for a time. Yet through the continual supply of strength from the sanctifying Spirit of Christ, the regenerate part overcomes. So the saints grow in grace, perfecting holiness in the fear of God. They pursue a heavenly life, in gospel obedience to all the commands that Christ as Head and King has given them in his Word.<sup>1</sup>

## Spirit or spirit?

In the first paragraph of this chapter, both the regenerate believer's "new spirit" and the Holy Spirit are mentioned. At the end of paragraph 2, language from the Authorized Version of Galatians 5:17 is used of the conflict between the flesh and the Holy Spirit. However, listed along with the Galatians 5:17 prooftext is 1 Peter 2:11 where believers are called upon "to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul." The latter passage is clearly noting the conflict between our fleshly desires and our human souls.

The dual reference creates some confusion when moving to paragraph 3 and its opening mention of "this war" in which, we are told, "the remaining corruption may greatly prevail for a time." The careful reader may ask, "What? The corruption of the flesh prevail over the Holy Spirit?" Then we realize that a shift has taken place in the confession to the struggle between the flesh and the regenerated human spirit. It is over the human spirit, although redeemed, that the flesh temporarily prevails.

## The War and Persecution

In the battle between the flesh and the Spirit, the flesh may appear to prevail, and according to the confession, may actually do so "for a time." In Romans 7:23, the Apostle Paul declares, "but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members." Although some today may differ in their interpretation of this passage, the framers of the confession understood Paul here to be referring to his own experience as a Christian struggling with sin. They used this verse as a prooftext for the believer's struggle with sin. Christians face a lifelong struggle between their redeemed spirits and their not-yet-redeemed bodies.

Seventeenth-century Baptists knew what it was to experience long physical struggles in their periodic bouts with persecution by the state. London Baptist pastor Hercules Collins (1647–1702) was one of the original signatories of the Second London Confession when it was approved by the General Assembly in 1689.<sup>2</sup> His long pastoral ministry at the Wapping Church (1677–1702) was punctuated by periods of persecution. In an imprisonment in 1684, Collins wrote to his church in a work titled *A Voice from Prison*. In this printed sermon, he urged his congregation to prepare themselves to endure persecution by practicing the mortification of their sins. "Let not that Man think to wear the

Cross of Persecution, that doth not first wear the Cross of Mortification.”<sup>3</sup> Collins went on to say,

We should inure our selves to wear the Publick Cross, by wearing it first more privately in our Houses, in our Families, in our Shops and Trades: For let not that Person think he will ever be able to part with his Houses, Lands, Liberties, for the Lord Jesus Christ, that cannot first part with a secret lust: But if we have Grace enough, to wear daily the Cross of Mortification of the old Man; you need not fear but he that giveth Grace to do the greater, will give Grace to doe the lesser; for I look upon the subduing of Corruption, a greater thing then enduring Persecution; though neither can be done as it ought, without help from Heaven.<sup>4</sup>

Those who, by the grace of God, were regularly putting to death their sins would experience an easier path in enduring physical persecution. Thus, Collins was encouraging personal holiness as the best means to prepare for persecution for the cause of Christ. Without this spiritual practice, professing believers would not be able to withstand the temptation to deny Christ in the face of persecution.

Collins closed his prison epistle with a series of prayers to God. In the first petition, Collins asked that God would purge the church of its impurities which he saw as a cause for their persecution. “God is contending with us,” Collins warned. Therefore, he urged his church to purify, not only their churches, but also their own hearts. “Let us all Banish and Expel the *Achan* out of our Hearts, out of our Churches, and shew our selves Zealous against Sin.”<sup>5</sup> Collins believed God was using persecution to drive believers to fight against their own sin in the continual war between the flesh and the spirit.

### **Winning the War**

Despite the seemingly unending quagmire, the “regenerate part” (redeemed soul) will ultimate overcome due to the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit who is at work within us to sanctify us. For this confidence, the framers pointed to Romans 6:14, which says, “For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.” The conquering of sin comes “through the continual supply of strength from the sanctifying Spirit of Christ.” Here the distinction between our redeemed human spirit and the Holy Spirit becomes clear. It is the Holy Spirit who enables our spirit to overcome the flesh. The Spirit is described by the adjective “Sanctifying” as opposed to the more common “Holy.” In other words, the Spirit who is Holy is in the business of making

men holy. It is only by the work of the Spirit that any victories over sin and the flesh are achieved.

From this point onward, this paragraph of the confession strikes a more encouraging note. Now, believers are addressed as “Saints” who are growing in grace and “perfecting holiness in the fear of God.” Although the modern English edition cited in this article has moved the scriptural proofs of Ephesians 4:15–16, 2 Corinthians 3:18 and 7:1 to the end of the paragraph, they were originally placed here in the original 1677 edition.<sup>6</sup> This placement is confirmed by a comparison of the text of the Second London Confession with one of its source documents—the Westminster Confession of Faith.<sup>7</sup> The Westminster Confession ended its chapter on sanctification with the phrase “fear of God” and included all three of the prooftexts. Ephesians 4:15–16, which speaks of believers growing up, illumines the phrase “the saints grow in grace.” 2 Corinthians 3:18, which speaks of “beholding the glory of the Lord” and “being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another,” explains the phrase “perfecting holiness.” 2 Corinthians 7:1, which commands believers to “let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God,” expands upon the idea of “perfecting holiness in the fear of God,” using the exact same language found in the Authorized Version.

As is well-known to the readers of this publication, the Second London Confession is a Baptist adaptation of the work of the Westminster Assembly in their confession of faith first published in 1647. Lesser known is that whenever the Second London Confession deviates from the wording of the Westminster divines, it follows the Savoy Declaration (1658) of the Congregationalists, which is itself a modification of the Westminster Confession. Perhaps even lesser known is that on occasion the framers of the Second London Confession would utilize the language of the First London Confession to emphasize their Baptist distinctives or to elaborate upon some topic. The Second London adds the wording from the latter part of the article on sanctification in the First London Confession to the original language of the Westminster/Savoy confessions.<sup>8</sup>

The topic of sanctification is addressed in chapter 29 of the First London Confession. The chapter in its entirety states:

All believers are a holy and sanctified people, and that sanctification is a spiritual grace of the new covenant, and an effect of the love of God manifested in the soul, whereby the believer presseth after a heavenly and evangelical obedience to all the commands, which Christ as head and king in His new covenant hath prescribed to them.<sup>9</sup>

Beginning with the word “presseth,” the Second London follows the language of the First London fairly closely in their seventeenth-century editions, the only substantial change being the exchange of “Word” for “new covenant.”<sup>10</sup> The additional language makes clear that genuine believers are interested in growing in holiness. They are not merely passive in the process of sanctification. The language of “pressing,” “obedience,” and “commands” reminds believers of their responsibility to “work out” their own salvation as God “works in” them (Philippians 2:12–13).

All this was to be done in submission to the authority of Christ as king and His precepts contained in the written Word. These Baptists built their churches upon the idea of the regulative principle of worship, which declared that God alone in His Word has the authority to determine how He is worshiped. The language from the end of the chapter on sanctification requiring “obedience to all the commands that Christ as Head and King has given them in His Word” seems very familiar. This was exactly the language used to defend their ecclesiastical distinctive of believer’s baptism by immersion. Their interest in the authority of Scripture and Christ as law-giver, however, was not merely ecclesiological, but also had direct personal application. In other words, they were not only interested in the church obeying the commands of Christ corporately regarding the ordinances, specifically the immersion of believers; they also held to the lordship of Christ over the individual lives of His people. Christ requires that His people walk and grow in holiness. Growing in holiness was no more optional for the individual believer than following Christ’s example in being immersed as a professing believer.

### **Conclusion: A Gospel Obedience**

The obedience to the commands of Christ, while expected of believers, were not seen as a means of justification. Instead, this obedience is a “gospel obedience” that flows out into believers’ lives as a result of faith in the gospel. Chapter 11 of the Second London makes clear that even this “gospel obedience” is not the means of justification. Believers are justified “for Christ’s sake alone and not for anything produced in them or done by them.” The confession goes on to say that Christ

does not impute faith itself, the act of believing, or any other gospel obedience to them as their righteousness. Instead, He imputes Christ’s active obedience to the whole law and passive obedience in His death as their whole and only righteousness by faith.



In his final work published in the final year of his life, Hercules Collins demonstrated how those who first embraced the confession lived out the tension between relying on Christ's righteousness and the biblical commands to pursue holiness. Believers, he said, "ought to live so holily as if we were to be saved by our living, and yet when we have done all, to rely upon Christ and his righteousness."<sup>11</sup>

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## NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Stan Reeves, ed., *The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith in Modern English* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2017), 31–32. Citations of the confession in the remainder of this article will come from this edition. Scripture references are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

<sup>2</sup> For details on the life and theology of Hercules Collins, see G. Stephen Weaver, Jr., *Orthodox, Puritan, Baptist: Hercules Collins (1647–1702) and Particular Baptist Identity in Early Modern England* (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Hercules Collins, *A Voice from the Prison, Or, Meditations on Revelations III.XI. Tending To the Establishment of Gods Little Flock, In an Hour of Temptation* (London, 1684), 30. Spelling and capitalization in original.

<sup>4</sup> Collins, *A Voice from the Prison*, 30.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>6</sup> See *A Confession of Faith: Put forth by the Elders and Brethren of Many Congregations of Christians (baptized upon Profession of their Faith) in London and the Country* (London: Benjamin Harris, 1677), 46.

<sup>7</sup> An excellent resource for comparing the major seventeenth-century Particular Baptist confessions and catechisms with their source documents has been provided in James M. Renihan, ed., *True Confessions: Baptist Documents in the Reformed Family* (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> The language used by the framers of the Second London Confession comes from the second edition of the First London Confession published in 1646. The first edition had been published in 1644. *A Confession of Faith of seven Congregations or Churches of Christ in London, which are commonly (but unjustly) called Anabaptists* (London: Matth. Simmons, 1646).

<sup>9</sup> Renihan, *True Confessions*, 116–17.

<sup>10</sup> The modern English edition begins this section with "They pursue..."

<sup>11</sup> Hercules Collins, *The Temple Repair'd: Or, An Essay to Revive the Long-Neglected Ordinances, of Exercising the Spiritual Gift of Prophecy for the Edification of the Churches; and of Ordaining Ministers Duly Qualified* (London: William and Joseph Marshal, 1702), 36–37.

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