



CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: LESSON 181

Though God the Spirit is the supernatural and immediate source of our sanctification, He works through means of grace in order to bring about our growth in holiness. At a high level the means of sanctification can be classified as the inward and outward means of sanctification.

Inward means of sanctification – Just as faith is the instrumental means of justification, so it is the instrumental and inward means of sanctification. Just as faith lays hold of Christ and His righteousness for justification, the believer’s exercise of faith is necessary in his progressive sanctification (Acts 14:22; Romans 11:20; 2 Corinthians 5:7; Galatians 2:20; Colossians 1:23; 1 Timothy 1:18-19; 6:11-12; 1 Peter 1:5; 5:9). Though regeneration and justification are complete, total and equal in all believers, sanctification is not equal, and varies in the lives of believers (Hebrews 5:12-14).

Outward means of sanctification – The Holy Spirit utilizes a number of outward means of grace to bring about growth in holiness in the life of believers. The chief means of sanctification employed by the Spirit to progressively sanctify believers is the Word of God. Believers are called to regularly attend to the Word of God in personal and family study and meditation, as well as in the hearing of it as preached and taught during public worship (Joshua 1:8; Psalm 1:1-3; Matthew 4:4; John 17:17; 1 Peter 2:1-3).

The sacraments of the church as instituted by Christ, that is, baptism and communion, are also means of grace, which the Spirit employs to signify, seal and apply the benefits of the work of Christ to believers. These are often referred to as the “visible Word” which tangibly communicate the truths expressed in the written Word. These are subordinate to the Word of God and must always be accompanied by it (Matthew 28:19; Romans 4:11-12; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; Colossians 2:11-12; 1 Peter 3:21).

There are other means of grace which the Holy Spirit employs in the growth of believers, and which believers are called to diligently attend to, such as corporate worship (Ephesians 5:18-20; Hebrews 10:24-25), private and corporate prayer (Ephesians 6:18; Philippians 4:6-7; 1 John 5:14-15), fellowship with believers (Acts 2:42; 1 Thessalonians 5:11; 1 John 1:7), use of spiritual gifts in serving others (1 Corinthians 12:7; Ephesians 4:11-13; 1 Peter 4:10), witnessing (Matthew 28:19-20), and also the discipline and providential guidance of God (John 15:2; Romans 5:3-4; Hebrews 12:10-11). Thus it is clear that growth in holiness involves a lot of work, requiring serious and diligent use of these means.

Synergistic work – Though Reformed theology teaches that regeneration and justification are monergistic, where only God is at work in us, it teaches that sanctification is synergistic, where God works in us and we work also. Our growth in holiness is a cooperative process. There are many passages in the Bible which teach the synergistic nature of sanctification (Romans 8:12-14; 1 Corinthians 15:10; Colossians 1:29; Hebrews 13:20-21). Philippians 2:12-13 is a classic passage on this, where on the one hand it teaches that it isn’t just God working, doing everything in our place for our sanctification (God-reliant passivity); and on the other hand it teaches that it isn’t just man working, leaving our salvation to our efforts and energies (self-reliant activity). Rather, this passage affirms that our growth in holiness is a joint venture, where while we are commanded to work, we are also to trust that God is working within us, who will accomplish His purposes in us (1 Corinthians 15:58; Philippians 1:6).

In summary, in order to not misunderstand the synergistic nature of sanctification, an important point needs to be stated here, that in saying that God and man cooperate in this process we are not saying that God and man do the same thing and in the same way; nor are we saying that God does His part and we do our part, and then growth occurs. Rather, God’s work in sanctification is primary, while ours is secondary; His is foundational, and ours is consequential. We work because God works in us. Our work, both the willing and the doing, is dependent on and the result of God’s continuous working in us.