

Settling Some Dust in the Sanctification Debate: remembering a neglected section of the Westminster Confession

By Chris Hutchinson

Senior Pastor, Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, VA

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. ~ Philippians 2:12-13

There has been quite the dustup recently in the Reformed world over the doctrine of sanctification. To over simplify things, some are saying that our sanctification primarily comes from remembering our justification, while others want a more rigorous attention to the effort we must contribute. I have no ambition to provide a comprehensive answer that will settle the dispute, but there is one often-neglected paragraph in the Westminster Confession of Faith that I believe can provide some peace to both sides, and thus settle at least some of the dust.

But first, we should not be surprised that there is considerable debate about sanctification among the Reformed. After all, the only remarkable thing about the Reformed doctrine of sanctification is that there is nothing remarkable about it. We are the ones who reject any sort of “golden key” solution to the problem. Other traditions offer a “second experience of grace,” the sacraments, or some one doctrine as offering the ultimate solve-all to the problem of ongoing sin in the Christian’s life. But the Reformed say we need all of the above, and even more. We are precisely in the already/not yet stage of our salvation, and so it must be messy – how could it not? We are already perfect – justified by simple faith in Christ (Romans 4:5); and at the same time not yet perfect – glorification still awaits us (Romans 8:23).

So of course we have discussions and debates about what this messy stage of sanctification looks like. And it may look different from Christian to Christian. A word in season to one believer may be a crushing discouragement to another. That is why we need wisdom – and even more, love for one another, that we might know how to speak in order to build up as each case requires (Ephesians 4:29; II Timothy 4:2).

But in all this, I believe that our forefathers wrestled through this problem well and produced a very helpful paragraph that is not as well known or used as I think it might be in these discussions. And that is Westminster Confession of Faith 14.2, from the chapter on Saving Faith, found just after the chapter on sanctification:

By this faith, a Christian believes to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God Himself speaking therein; and acts differently upon that which each particular passage thereof contains; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and

embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come. But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.

Now to place this section in context, this chapter on saving faith follows the chapters on justification, adoption and sanctification – the three main benefits of redemption in this life (WSC 32). And so this chapter is written to ensure that we see salvation as full orbled. True saving faith is more than just a one-time decision to receive Christ, but is a life long and growing faith (cf. I Thessalonians 2:13 and I Peter 1:2, in which we are said to be “saved” by sanctification, which I take to be more than definitive, positional sanctification).

So WCF 14 begins with the reminder that saving faith is the work of the Spirit in our hearts “ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word,” and only then increased and strengthened by all three means of grace – Word, sacraments and prayer. This reminds us of the priority of the Word in Reformed ministry. The spoken promise of the Gospel is where we must begin all ministry, to believer and unbeliever alike. Sacraments and prayer assist this ministry, but nothing avails anyone unless they first passively receive the Word – not as actors but as those acted upon. Justifying faith is always and only passive as the Larger Catechism makes clear (WLC 72). If we lose this we lose any hope of providing a sure and certain assurance of salvation.

But then, unless we think that the Christian life is an entirely passive affair, the divines give us 14.2, as quoted above. This paragraph reminds us that following on our justification, the Christian life involves life-long repentance and obedience and even trembling. Every passage of the Bible must be believed and – once properly understood – applied. The Christian life involves action. It is Philippians 2:12b, straight up: *work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.*

So is that it? Does that settle the debate? The “effort” side wins? It is almost as if the divines anticipated our present day dispute. Which, of course they did, since it was a dispute in their day as well (cf. *The Rise of Moralism* by C. Fitzsimons Allison). And so they went on to write this important sentence:

But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.

The authors remind us that even though the Christian life must involve action, that which is *principal* is still passive – accepting, receiving and resting upon Christ alone. And note that this is not just for justification, but for sanctification as well. So the divines state that the principal acts of sanctification involve resting on Christ, not our own actions! And so now, it is Philippians 2:13: *for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*

Now, I am not sure what that always looks like in any given situation. We have all known people who “try too hard” to live the Christian life and just end up making themselves and everyone around them burdened and depressed. I would suspect that most of us have been that person at some time in our lives. And so our word to them must be to rest. To remember their justification. To somehow depend upon Christ for the strength to be more holy. To slow down and relax a little. To enjoy their life and remember that in Christ, God has already approved their works and they should not try to be more than they are (Ecclesiastes 7:16; 9:7; Colossians 2:8-23).

But we have also all known believers who take their salvation for granted and seemingly have little interest in increasing their faith and repentance. They need to be reminded of the first part of this paragraph; that if they have true saving faith, then they will respond to the Word with particular repentance, change and action, as various passages of the Bible are learned and understood. This is why pastors and elders must be involved in their parishioners’ lives so that the general Word in sermons may be specifically applied to individual situations through gentle and patient discipleship (cf. Philippians 3:15; II Timothy 2:24-25).

And so this section of the Westminster Confession provides important guidance and balance to these discussions. To the “rest” side, it reminds us that the Christian life involves effort – God empowered effort, but effort nonetheless. And effort that at times even trembles at the threatenings of God’s Word. To the “effort” side, it reminds us that we must not make principal what God’s Word does not – that the principal acts of sanctification remain accepting, receiving and resting on Christ alone, and never our own efforts.

Now no ministry ever gets this balance perfectly and so we must be careful not to pick and pull at each violation lest we devour one another (cf. Galatians 5:15). But if, as a whole, a Reformed ministry does not remind its people that their sanctification involves ongoing repentance, change and trembling, then it fails its own confession at that point. Believing the Gospel leads to concrete application (cf. Romans 12:1ff; Ephesians 4:1ff).

And likewise, if a Reformed ministry fails to emphasize resting in Christ for sanctification, then it too falls short of the Confession. I have heard many preachers and conference speakers who have done just that. I have left such talks wishing that the speakers had first meditated upon WCF 14.2 before burdening their hearers with so many strong, specific and fleshly exhortations. They had reversed the Confessional order, making effort principal, rather than rest.

So I believe that there is enough in Westminster Confession 14.2 to satisfy and challenge both sides of the discussion. And if heeded, that some of the dust of this debate may peaceably settle, with all sides better able to listen well and balance out what may be imbalanced in their own ministries, rather than everyone else’s.

Chris Hutchinson has been Senior Pastor of Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church in Blacksburg, VA since 2004, and may be reached at chris@gracecovenantpca.org.