

## **Seeing the Lord: Hebrews 12:14 and the Westminster Confession of Faith<sup>1</sup>**

What does it take to see the Lord? Especially, what is essential to seeing him in the last day? What does it take to see him, not as the Judge condemning you, but as your Shepherd, as your Redeemer, welcoming you into his eternal presence?

Were I to suggest that essential for seeing the Lord is holiness, the reaction might be, “that sounds like basing salvation on works.” We very properly recoil from the suggestion that our works have any meritorious role in our salvation – that was something learned afresh at the time of the Protestant Reformation. And yet Heb. 12:14 tells us: “Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.”<sup>2</sup> The language of that verse forms a minor theme in the Westminster Confession of Faith, emphasizing the vital role of holiness in the life of the believer, but clearly avoiding any suggestion of justification by works.<sup>3</sup>

How does holiness function in the life of the believer? Few would question that holiness must be present in the believer. But is holiness, or sanctification, essential primarily because it is the fruit and proof of justification (if there is no holiness that means that one has not been justified, and thus is not saved)? It has been alleged that this is the position of Reformed confessions. On an Internet discussion list a seminary professor (who teaches at a seminary which is committed to the reformed faith and which subscribes to the Westminster Standards and the Three Forms of Unity) suggested that those whose positions he was criticizing “. . . are not actually engaging the position held by the confessions, that . . . sanctity is nothing more or less than the fruit and evidence of justification”<sup>4</sup> Assuming that the professor is using “sanctity” as functionally

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<sup>1</sup> Revised slightly in August 2008, updating the footnote referencing Mark Garcia’s dissertation (n8 below) to the published version instead of the unpublished dissertation, which was the form available when this was submitted in May 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Scripture quotes are from the *English Standard Version*.

<sup>3</sup> The author was reminded of the importance of this verse in the Westminster Confession of Faith 13.1 in a conversation with Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., although the latter did not mention the verse as a theme in the Confession.

<sup>4</sup> Yahoo! Groups: bbwarfield: The Warfield List, Message 15854, Aug. 5, 2003.

equivalent to sanctification – and the context suggests that he is – the present writer would agree that sanctification is never *less* than evidence of justification. But I believe that both Scripture and the Westminster standards treat sanctification as something distinct from, something in addition to, and thus decidedly *more* than just fruit and evidence of justification. Although the quote from the discussion list might be dismissed as a relatively unconsidered expression (the Internet is not necessarily conducive to doing theology well), it reflects, in this writer’s observation, a view of the relationship between justification and sanctification expressed commonly enough that a response could be helpful.

On this later view that sanctity is more than fruit and evidence of justification, the central concept is seen as union with Christ, with justification and sanctification being distinct aspects of the believer’s union with the Lord in his death and resurrection. As Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. unpacks Rom. 6 he writes that the factor basic “to the exhortation to progress in sanctification (vv. 12ff.) is that believers have died and been raised with Christ. By virtue of this involvement they are dead to sin, that is, alive to God (v. 11), alive from the dead (v. 13). Their freedom from the dominion and power of sin resides specifically in their having been raised with Christ. In other words, (definitive) sanctification is defined here expressly in terms of resurrection.”<sup>5</sup>

In the theology of the Roman Catholic Church, justification is tied to grace, but it is an infused grace. Thus justification is made to rest on sanctification. In that scheme justification, at least for most people, is partial, tentative, and incomplete in this life. Perhaps part of the problem arises from a tendency to view reformed theology as simply transposing the Roman order of sanctification and justification: “Before the Reformation we were said to be justified to the extent that we were sanctified. In the Reformation that pattern was reversed: sanctification was made the result of justification.”<sup>6</sup> However the writings of the author of Hebrews as well as the Apostle Paul appear to take a more nuanced view of the relationship between justification and sanctification. Nor does the Westminster Confession of Faith appear simply to reverse the pre-Reformation order.

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<sup>5</sup> *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul’s Soteriology*, (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1987) 125.

<sup>6</sup> R. Scott Clark, “How We Got Here,” *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry*, (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2007) 21.

As we examine the broader context of Heb. 12:14, we note that central to the epistle is the surpassing excellence of Christ as the high priest of his people. The author begins by describing the Son who is the radiance of God's glory and states: "After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" Heb. 1:3b. Later in the epistle, especially in chapter 9, he emphasizes the sacrificial work of the great high priest: "so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him" Heb. 9:28. Without question the basis for our salvation is nothing else than the completed work of Christ in our place.

The Apostle Paul describes our justification in terms of God crediting or imputing righteousness to us: "That is why his faith was 'counted to him as righteousness.' But the words 'it was counted to him' were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification" Rom. 4:22-25. And after contrasting the representative roles of Adam and Christ, he concludes: "Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous" Rom. 5:18-19. The author of Hebrews is no less clear than Paul that our salvation rests on nothing that we do or are, but only on Christ himself: "He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself" Heb. 7:27.

But Hebrews (like Paul) does not limit our salvation to justification alone, as crucially important as is the forensic, or judicial, aspect of our union with Christ. God not only declares us "not guilty," he also works in us by his Spirit, the Spirit of the risen Christ, to make us holy. Calvin emphasizes the impossibility of separating justification and sanctification: "It is indeed true, that we are justified in Christ through the mercy of God alone; but it is equally true and certain, that all who are justified are called by the Lord, that they may live worthy of their vocation. Let then the faithful learn to embrace him, not only for justification, but also for sanctification, as he has been given to us for both these purposes, lest they rend him asunder by their mutilated faith."<sup>7</sup> Already in this life God is making us into the people that we will be in eternity. Justification and

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<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, at Rom. 8:13.

sanctification are distinct, but they are inseparable, because of our Spirit-wrought union with Christ. Mark Garcia describes that relationship carefully:

Specifically, the inseparability of justification and sanctification is rooted in the inseparability of Christ and the Spirit in their common redemptive activity. Christ who is Life by his Spirit necessarily vivifies those united to him just as a living vine necessarily yields fruit in its branches. . . . Union with Christ is thus fully personal and necessarily vivifying, and yet is described in such a way that the forensic dimension is not compromised by its basis in union: the Righteous Christ is in himself both justification and sanctification.<sup>8</sup>

The Westminster Larger Catechism, Q. & A. 69 reflects the centrality of the union of believers with Christ: “The communion in grace which the members of the invisible church have with Christ, is their partaking of the virtue of his mediation, in their justification, adoption, sanctification, and whatever else, in this life, manifests their union with him.” The statement on the Internet discussion list mentioned above would have been more accurate had it described sanctity as being fruit, not of justification, but of union with Christ.

In addition to emphasizing the sacrificial work of our great high priest, the author of Hebrews exhorts his readers to persevere in their walk with Christ. In the nearer context of Heb. 12 he calls us to sanctification: “In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood,” v. 4 and, “See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal” vv. 15-16. In between he calls us to seek the holiness without which we will not see the Lord, v. 14.

Can something be essential for our redemption without being the *basis* of salvation? The Westminster Confession of Faith treats repentance that way: “Although repentance be not to be rested in, as any satisfaction for sin, or any cause of the pardon thereof, which is the act of God's free grace in Christ; yet it is of such necessity to all sinners, that none may expect pardon without it” 15:3.

Similarly, when the Confession describes sanctification, it quotes the language of Heb. 12:14: “They, who are once effectually called, and regenerated, having a new heart, and a new spirit created in them, are further sanctified, really and personally, through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, by his Word

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<sup>8</sup> Mark A. Garcia, *Life in Christ: Union with Christ and Twofold Grace in Calvin's Theology* (Bletchley, Milton Keynes, U.K., Paternoster, 2008) 194.

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 *true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord*” WCF 13:1 (emphasis mine). Among the Scripture references for the last clause, both in the form adopted by the Westminster Assembly, and in the proof texts approved by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church in America, is Heb. 12:14.

Although chapter 13 is the only place in the Confession where Heb. 12:14 is included in the proof texts, the language of the verse is paraphrased in two other places. Related to sanctification are good works, and the Confession speaks of believers, doing good works “. . . that, having their fruit unto holiness, they may have the end, eternal life” (16:2), apparently echoing the thought and some of the language of Heb. 12:14. And even more clearly, in the chapter that speaks of what happens after this life when the sanctification of believers is complete, (“Of the State of Men after Death, and of the Resurrection of the Dead”), we read “. . . the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies” (32:1).

The God who declares us “not guilty” in Jesus Christ does not limit his work to our justification. Neither the Scriptures nor the Confession of Faith treat sanctification as less important than justification. We dare never view growth in holiness as something optional or secondary in our Christian life. Rather, if we are united to Christ by faith, the God who justifies us is also busy by his Spirit working holiness in the people he has chosen. Holiness is as much a part of our salvation as is justification. The two must be distinguished, but never separated.

Richard B. Gaffin’s doctoral dissertation deals with the concepts of resurrection and redemption, particularly in the writings of Paul. He suggests that “Paul does not view the justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification of the believer as separate, distinct acts but as different facets or aspects of the *one act* of incorporation with the resurrected Christ.”<sup>9</sup> Although his focus is on Paul, his point is relevant to the broader question of the relationship between justification and sanctification, both in the confessions of the church and in the lives of her members:

Not only are the two not independent, unrelated interests, but it is not enough to say that sanctification (whether as definitive act or process)

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<sup>9</sup> Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption*, 130-131.

inevitably follows on the act of justification by a particular divine determination conjoining otherwise separable entities. Rather the two are indissolubly linked as different facts of the single act of being raised (incorporated) with Christ. The close connection between Romans 5 and 6 rests on the consideration that, having discussed the justification entailed by solidarity in Christ's resurrection (cf. 4:24), Paul turns to treat the sanctification this solidarity also involves. This does not mean that Paul obscures the distinction between justification and sanctification. On the contrary, unlike many of his modern interpreters, he grasps too clearly the various needs created by sin to compromise either of these or any other of the manifold aspects of the redemption experienced so efficaciously in *resurrection*.<sup>10</sup>

Gaffin's mature reflection, written shortly before his retirement from Westminster Theological Seminary and with an eye toward contemporary developments, continues to sound the emphasis on the close connection between justification and sanctification, both flowing out of union with Christ:

In the matter of sanctification, it seems to me, we must confront a tendency, at least practical, and, my impression is, pervasive, within churches of the Reformation to view the gospel and salvation in its outcome almost exclusively in terms of justification. . . . The effect of this outlook, whether or not intended, is that sanctification tends to be seen as the response of the believer to salvation, defined in terms of justification. . . . With such a construction justification and sanctification are pulled apart; the former is what God does, the latter what we do, and do so inadequately.<sup>11</sup>

With pointed carefulness Gaffin concludes a chapter which deals with sanctification:

Sanctification is an aspect and outcome of the reality of the resurrection already experienced by the believer and its ongoing, progressive realization has no deeper perspective from which it can be viewed than that it is a continual "living to God" by those who are "alive from the dead" (to be sure, "in the mortal body," Rom. 6:11-13). Or, as Paul puts it in Ephesians 2:10 – perhaps the most decisive biblical pronouncement on "good works," sanctification is a matter of those – note, just those who are "saved by grace through faith and not by works" (vv. 8-9) – who "have been created in Christ Jesus for the good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." . . . The deepest

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<sup>10</sup> Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption*, 131.

<sup>11</sup> Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *By Faith, Not By Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation*, (Bletchley, Milton Keynes, Bucks, U.K., Paternoster, 2006) 76.

motive for our sanctification, for holy living and good works, is not our psychology, not how I “feel” about God and Jesus. Nor is it even our faith. Rather, that profoundest of motives is the resurrection power of Christ, the new creation that we are and have been made a part of in Christ by his Spirit.<sup>12</sup>

In the daily Christian life sin interferes with fellowship with the Lord. The believer must be busy putting to death the deeds of the flesh, Col. 3:5. He cannot ignore holiness and still expect to see the Lord in the last day.

Because holiness is essential to seeing the Lord, the Holy Spirit works in the Christian, shaping him to his glory. Neither works nor even faith are the *basis* of salvation – the basis is always the perfect obedience of Christ, imputed to the believer. Because holiness is essential to seeing the Lord, both the book of Hebrews and its reflections in the Confession of Faith summon Christians to strive for it, admonishing us to seek something that God is working in us. And thus both the Scriptures and the Confession can rejoice in the Spirit-wrought good works which are the fruit of sanctification. Perhaps we fail to delight as readily as we should when we see in the lives of God’s people the growth in holiness which flows out of union with Christ. We have a Scriptural imperative to stir one another (and ourselves) up to good works (Heb. 10:24).

The believer’s future, perfect sanctification flows out of the Spirit-wrought process of growing in holiness during this life. Already in one’s daily life he is connected with what will be true in eternity, or to put it more exactly, what is already true of him in Christ. We think of the glory and perfection of heaven as future, which is accurate. And yet Hebrews, shortly after calling us to strive for holiness, informs us: “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem . . . and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (12:22-24). Holiness characterizes the Christian both now (in a true and wonderful way) and in eternity (perfectly) – because Jesus is the crucified and risen Savior. To him be the glory forever!

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<sup>12</sup> Gaffin, *By Faith, Not By Sight*, 78.