

Spiritual Formation as Spiritual Deception: Beware the Peddlers of Grace

Mike Spaulding

This is a research paper that will investigate the biblical teaching of the sanctification of the believer in light of current spiritual formation teaching. Research will be presented showing that the historic Christian theistic understanding and teaching concerning sanctification has been obfuscated today by the so-called spirituality of spiritual formation teaching. Part one will offer an analysis of the importance of the biblical teaching on sanctification. Part two will present the ways that sanctification has been understood in the church historically. Part three will detail the recent re-interpretations of sanctification from within the spiritual formation perspective. Part four will suggest a corrective to the current path of teaching on spirituality and suggest a return to biblical sanctification. Part five will present a summation of what is at stake for the church if it does not heed this call.

This effort will rely primarily on an article written by Steven L. Porter that appeared in the September 2002 issue of the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*. In his article Porter suggests that what is needed today is a more robust systematic theology related to the doctrine of sanctification. It is the position of this writer that what is needed today is much more than a systematic treatment of spiritual formation. Instead of seeking a bigger tent to encompass all the expressions of evangelical spiritual formation and disciplines today, an evaluation of the practices themselves will reveal a need to return to the biblical teaching on sanctification.

The Importance of Teaching Biblical Sanctification

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians to exhort readers to continue their Christian life and thereby their sanctification by faith. His question to the Galatians then and to readers of this

paper today is equally appropriate: “Did you receive the Spirit by works of the Law, or by hearing with faith.”¹ In other words did you gain life in Christ by your efforts or by the Holy Spirit? Clearly, we are saved by grace² and the Scriptures teach that we are sanctified in the same manner.

Addressing an age-old issue is at the heart of this question by the apostle to the Galatians. Mankind has a demonstrated tendency to stray from the path of divine instruction and end up on a path of its own making and choosing. Paul’s letter to the Colossians provides a ready example of this truth. The apostle asked the Colossians a question similar to the one he asked of the Galatians: “If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, ‘do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!’” The point the apostle makes here is that the types of activities the Colossians were submitting themselves to could not secure the grace of sanctification being touted by the false teachers of the day and was in fact without warrant based on the teachings of Jesus Christ.

It is important to understand the biblical teaching on sanctification precisely because there has developed a plethora of methods suggesting that sanctification is predominantly the responsibility of the individual believer to achieve by whatever means the individual deems experientially satisfying.³ While it is true that sanctification has an experiential aspect, i.e., we are called to “work out our salvation,” it cannot be maintained that individuals are free to subscribe to any method of their choosing. That does not stop many professing Christians from

¹Galatians 3:2. Unless otherwise stated all Scripture references are from The New American Standard Bible, Updated 1995, *The Lockman Foundation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995).

²Ephesians 2:8.

³Dallas Willard for example states that spirituality/sanctification is achieved by emulating the lifestyle of Jesus. He refers to this as the “easy yoke” of Christ and asserts that in “this truth lies the secret of the easy yoke: the secret involves living as He lived in the entirety of His life – adopting His overall lifestyle . . . We have to discover how to enter into his disciplines from where we stand today – and no doubt, how to extend and amplify them to suit our needy cases.” *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, (HarperCollins: New York, NY: 1991), 5, 9.

attempting self-sanctification through extra-biblical means though. Witness for instance the variety of Purpose Driven emphases, the myriad spiritual, marriage, and youth retreats, self-help study groups, recovery groups, care groups, healing and dealing with specific issues of life groups, and the thousands of books on the so-called spiritual formation techniques of contemplative prayer, mystical silence and solitude of the soul, labyrinth walking, chanting, and visualization. The sincerity of the creators and authors of these techniques and the eagerness of practitioners to indulge themselves in these techniques is not being questioned in this paper. The validity of what they are practicing and urging others to engage in under the guise of spiritual growth, formation, and discipline is being questioned however. This concern underscores the urgent need to speak directly to the evangelical Church of its need to understand and teach as a core doctrine the subject of the biblical method for the sanctification of the believer.

We are instructed in Scripture to discipline ourselves as a means to godliness.⁴ Therefore being holy is a goal of every Christian. Does it follow that whatever technique or process deemed useful by a Christian is acceptable to God? Following that practice has surely led Christians outside the boundaries of how God has determined He will be approached and how His people will grow in sanctification. Mystical experiences and pragmatic techniques are nowhere called for in the Scriptures as a means to godliness. One of the reasons the Reformers advocated Sola Scriptura was to evaluate and eliminate those teachings outside the warrant of Scripture. It appears the modern Protestant evangelical Church has forgotten this principle.

⁴1 Timothy 4:7.

Evangelical Sanctification Historically Expressed

Both D. A. Carson⁵ and Steven L. Porter⁶ recently wrote articles that appeared in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* questioning the approach and methodology of spiritual formation teaching. Although separated by eight years, Carson's article explaining the dangers of spirituality apart from a robust bibliography appears to have laid a solid groundwork for Porter's article espousing the need for a biblical methodology that presents a clear and thoughtful evangelical theology of sanctification. In the process of their individual critiques they offer some pertinent historical context related to sanctification.

Porter begins his critique of spiritual formation teaching by asserting that its practices must fall within prescribed biblical territory and as such the effort to define acceptable spiritual formation activities belongs to Christian theologians. That Christian theologians have not been involved in establishing parameters is evidenced by the "plethora of false spiritualities plaguing church and society"⁷ in our present day. This is to be expected when the purpose or goal of sanctification is unclear.

There have been various goals of sanctification espoused by believers over the years. This *telos* or goal of sanctification must be carefully formulated from the Scriptures otherwise the odds are very great that legalism and forms of works righteousness will be unwittingly substituted.⁸ Porter makes this a pivotal point in his discussion. Without an explicit

⁵D. A. Carson, "When is Spirituality Spiritual? Reflections on Some Problems of Definition," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, vol. 37, no. 3 (September 1994): 381-394.

⁶Steve Porter, "On the Renewal of Interest in the Doctrine of Sanctification: A Methodological Reminder," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, vol. 45, no. 3 (September 2002): 415-426.

⁷Robert V. Rakestraw, "Becoming Like God: An Evangelical Doctrine of Theosis," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, vol. 40, no. 2, (June 1997): 257-269.

⁸Porter, 416.

understanding of the goal of sanctification from a biblical perspective, the adherent is most likely to venture into areas that appear orthodox but are wrought with perilous outcomes. Carson states the same thing by insisting that sanctification cannot be reduced to an “ill-defined, amorphous entity” that gives cover to all forms of activities more thoughtful Christians see as being in grave error or even pagan and heathen; instead sanctification must be anchored clearly to the gospel.⁹

The doctrine of sanctification has been approached from at least five major perspectives historically within the Church. Each lends itself to a distinct concern. These views on the desired goal of sanctification have included: 1) The Evangelical tradition of Christ-likeness; 2) The Holiness tradition of moral transformation; 3) The Contemplative tradition of relationship to God; 4) The Charismatic tradition of Spirit-filled living; and 5) The Social Justice tradition of service to mankind.¹⁰ Each of these perspectives finds expression in modern Christianity both in the established religious practices of denominations and religious persuasions and in the spiritual formation advocates. Porter sees in this myriad of expressions and purported goals of sanctification a conceptual confusion. He does not attempt to elevate one approach above another however. Instead he is concerned that these approaches create a cloud of confusion for the consumer of the spiritual formation literature. A natural tendency would be to adopt some type of sanctification pluralism whereby the five perspectives/goals of sanctification expressed above are melded into a syncretistic system of thought and practice. This is not a tenable option as Porter explains:

The problem with pluralism of any kind is that if we do not actually have knowledge of the reality in question independently of the plurality of perspectives, then we cannot develop any criteria to determine which perspectives or which parts of various perspectives correspond to the reality in question. And if we do not have the means to discriminate between the various

⁹Carson, 381, 391-392.

¹⁰Porter, 420.

perspectives or their parts, then all perspectives and each part becomes either equally valid or equally invalid. Relativism or skepticism prevails— take your pick. So we must already have some understanding of sanctification in order to determine which traditions of Christian spirituality and which parts of those traditions are actually helpful in developing a more robust view of the Christian life. Hence, the pluralist approach cannot in principle deal with the conceptual confusion I have adumbrated. It only serves to reinforce it. We must have a doctrine of sanctification before going to Church history to discover ways in which that view has been illuminated.¹¹

Herein lays the rather prickly and formidable obstacle for all religious teaching that implicitly or explicitly is disconnected from divine revelation as expressed in the Scriptures. The idea that balance is achieved within a field of inquiry by incorporating all available perspectives is nonsense in the least and when it comes to Christian theism it is destructive. As in the rejoinder to those who attempt to use some type of “blind men and an elephant” illustration to suggest the need for tolerance and pluralism in religious matters, i.e., you must have someone who has escaped the blindness to see that the rest are grasping only a part of the truth and thereby understand the solution; so it is with sanctification pluralism – you must admit to a starting place, a point of objective truth, a solid foundation of understanding and expression related to exactly what biblical, Christian theistic sanctification looks like, else you end in skepticism and relativism.

Spiritual Formation Teaching Re-interprets Historical Biblical Sanctification

While the roots of much of what is presented as spiritual formation and spiritual disciplines teaching today can be traced back to the so-called “desert fathers,”¹² the current emphasis on

¹¹Ibid., 420-421.

¹²Author Ray Yungen points out that "The desert fathers believed as long as the desire for God was sincere-- anything could be utilized to reach God. If a method worked for the Hindus to reach their gods, then Christian mantras could be used to reach Jesus." Yungen also provides a detailed family tree of sorts that traces the spirituality of the desert fathers to unsuspecting Christians today. He states, "If one could draw a spiritual tree of both Brennan Manning's and Richard Foster's mystical heritage it would look like this: from India to Alexandria, to the desert fathers, to Thomas Merton to them; and now, through them and others like them to you. What it should look like is:

Christian spirituality can be traced to the early eighteenth century French Catholic priest Giovanni Scaramelli who insisted that spirituality and the pursuit of what was previously defined as sanctification was primarily an ascetic and mystical endeavor.¹³ Scaramelli clearly fused the rigorous asceticism and mystical practices of Roman Catholic monasticism into a more appealing and broad-based spirituality hoping to appeal to Roman Catholic laity.¹⁴ The net effect of that teaching created a type of spiritual theology that Scaramelli and other Roman Catholic leaders insisted was presupposed by dogmatic theology.

The contrast between biblical sanctification and the new spiritualities being extolled today demonstrates sharp disagreement. This is so in large part due to the inversion of theological underpinnings and the inclusion of what is being termed as “open source” spirituality. This phrase is commonly used in the computer software development field and refers specifically to the utilization of any resource deemed useful. Aside from the obvious pragmatic flavor this definition conjures for the Christian, its incorporation into the theological lexicon and its practical outworking is akin to the horse gladly received by the citizens of Troy as a gift from the gods. The reality is that syncretism is at work within modern Christianity disguised as spiritual formation.

This charge may seem overstated. After all, the intention of those advocating and practicing spiritual formation techniques today is not to lead other Christians astray but is intended to

from the triune God to His holy prophets and apostles to you." *A Time of Departing*, 2nd ed., (Silverton, OR: Lighthouse Trails Publishing, 2006), 43, 89.

¹³Carson, 382. This Jesuit priest is credited by Carson with being the first to make dogmatic theology a result of so-called spiritual theology, i.e., that dogmatic theology presupposes spiritual theology. Until Scaramelli dogmatic theology was taught to be the basis for all other pursuits. Scaramelli insisted that spiritual theology, which for him was the practice of prayer, sacraments, vows of poverty, celibacy, and other Catholic teachings, was the basis for doctrine.

¹⁴Ibid., 384. Carson suggests that the primary goal of Vatican II was “to intensify Christian spirituality” within Roman Catholic believers. This same emphasis on spirituality is seen in much liberal Protestant efforts. Both make a fatal mistake of presenting Jesus as “example or prototype” as contrasted with historic Christian theistic expressions of Jesus as Lord and Savior primarily.

provide a clear way to draw closer to God. It bears repeating that anything not evidenced in the Bible relating to sanctification must be examined closely. An example of the prevalent syncretism underpinning much of spiritual formation and spiritual disciplines teaching today is the following comment by author Donald Whitney, explaining what he means by the phrase spiritual disciplines: “This book examines the Spiritual Disciplines of Bible intake, prayer, worship, evangelism, service, stewardship, fasting, silence and solitude, journaling, and learning. This is by no means, however, an exhaustive list of the Disciplines of Christian living. A survey of *other literature* (emphasis mine) on this subject would reveal that confession, accountability, simplicity, submission, spiritual direction, celebration, affirmation, sacrifice, “watching,” and *more* (emphasis mine) also qualify as Spiritual Disciplines.”¹⁵

Exactly what silence, solitude, journaling, confession (to others I presume), accountability (again to others), simplicity, celebration, and affirmation have to do with sanctification is not explained by Whitney. At issue is the validity of incorporating techniques and practices that seem harmless into Christian living and thereby giving them equal standing with those things clearly elucidated in Scripture as means of sanctification. Stated in another way, is it legitimate for mankind to determine what things constitute sanctifying practices or is mankind infringing upon God’s domain in attempting to set forth spiritual formation and disciplines techniques when God has already spoken to the creation on this subject? Is this a new form of strange fire?

Another issue that can be raised with Whitney’s perspective on sanctification is what other literature does he incorporate into his understanding and subsequent teaching on the doctrine and what does he mean by “more” techniques can be included under a definition of spiritual formation? When sanctification is re-interpreted in the fashion Whitney and other spiritual

¹⁵Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1991), 17.

formation advocates suggest and includes literature from other religious traditions and even secular sources under the banner of all truth is God's truth, then the biblical teaching and theology of sanctification becomes nothing more than an individually created synthetic theology construct. As Carson is quick to point out in his summary of spiritual formation, not all spirituality is spiritual in any New Testament sense: "The fact remains that the different understandings of spirituality represented by different world religions need careful delineation. The sheer diversity of the implicit theological structures means that the meaning of 'spirituality' degenerates into something amorphous like 'an experience of the numinous,' in which everyone loads 'numinous' with that which is right in his or her own eyes".¹⁶ Modern Christians would do well to recall that Israel's slide into idolatry was due to this very same practice of melding spiritual practices from the pagans and heathens around them.

Returning to Biblical Sanctification

The doctrine of sanctification rightly belongs to the discipline of systematic theology. Although most systematic theologies are short on content when it comes to explaining sanctification the reason is not that there is not much to say but instead is due to the fact that most theological issues are addressed under different categories within systematic theology. Porter suggests that a remedy to this oversight is for evangelicals to "make our deeper theological commitments explicit in our teachings and writings on sanctification . . . The doctrine of sanctification needs to be related more explicitly to the doctrine of God, human nature, sin, the atonement, justification, regeneration, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, etc."¹⁷ Porter's effort to

¹⁶Carson 388.

¹⁷Porter, 425.

re-direct spiritual formation teaching back to the Bible is to be commended. Sanctification is in the final analysis the outworking of justification.¹⁸

Carson reminds his readers that Christian sanctification works outward from the center of theology and not from the periphery inward.¹⁹ In stating this he is acknowledging that there are biblical and theological guidelines to define and anchor sanctification as a doctrine and process to the gospel. This is the heritage that evangelical Christians must reclaim within the larger contemporary conversation about spiritual formation. This principle is important because once we recognize that sanctification is always tied to the Word of God we will seek to evaluate all forms, techniques, and processes by the Word. Jesus stated this principle clearly when he said “Sanctify them in the truth; Thy word is truth.”²⁰ When spiritual formation and spiritual disciplines are tied to the Word, when they are evaluated on the basis of conformity to and harmony with the Scriptures, we can revise and adjust teachings and experiences according to what we know and therefore avoid the seducing spirits of the present age that work against the faithful biblical expressions of evangelical Christianity.

Additionally it would appear helpful to remind evangelical Protestants that sanctification is not solely an individual effort. There is a sense in which the process of sanctification that believers enter into is conducted within a community of believers. Together, believers comprise the body of Christ and as the body there exists a corporate ethical responsibility to participation in the kingdom of God.

¹⁸Romans 6:5-8.

¹⁹Carson, 393.

²⁰John 17:17.

What Is At Stake for the Evangelical Church If the Call Is Not Heeded?

Steven L. Porter wrote to remind readers and especially those seeking spiritual formation techniques as a means of achieving sanctification that their efforts are not free from expression within a systematic theology. He is concerned about the multitude of emerging spiritualities that appear in the Church today. Unfortunately Porter does not seek to correct those in error. Instead he suggests that the multiple expressions have created confusion in terminology and the goal of sanctification. His remedy is to advance an appeal to an overriding methodology that would make sense of the myriad spiritual formation teachings by uniting them under the banner of systematic theology.

There is a clear and understandable expression in the Scriptures of what sanctification is. Porter is right to insist that the doctrine of sanctification must be related explicitly to “the doctrine of God, human nature, sin, the atonement, justification, regeneration, (and) the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.”²¹ Disconnected from dogmatic theology sanctification becomes individual opinion expressed in terms of mystical and other misguided transformative activities. The Church today is in dire need of clear thinking and a revival of the practice of hermeneutics and exegesis both in the pulpit and among the laity. This is a tall order to be sure but one that needs to be pressed nonetheless.

Sadly, most evangelicals today need to be taught instead of reminded that when Christians obey God by faith He works out sanctification in us. Put another way, God’s grace and sanctifying work comes to us through our faith in Him. We are saved initially by God’s grace through faith. Sanctification is a continuation of that same process. It is by God’s grace through our faith in Him that He works in us to bring about what we call Christian maturity or sanctification. Sanctification is experiential within the context of experiencing Him. The means

²¹Porter, 425.

to His grace through faith are contained within the Scriptures. Of course the Roman Church teaches the opposite, namely that sanctification is obtained *ex opera operato*, meaning “by the work done,”²² in an attempt to justify its works based teaching on sanctification. Apparent in this statement is the Reformed perspective of this writer. The Reformers were quick to divorce themselves and their teaching from the Roman view of sacramental practice as the means of grace and sanctification. Instead Luther insisted that sanctification was a result of the working of the Word of God in the life of believers. The sacraments were thus reduced from the seven of Romanism to the two – baptism and the Lord’s Supper – which most evangelicals practice today within Protestantism.

While Porter’s premises could be construed as true – the rampant growth of spiritual formation teaching has loosened itself from a systematic theological oversight and this has in turn led to confusion surrounding the doctrine of sanctification. His conclusion however is lacking from the perspective of this writer. The conclusion that is warranted is that spiritual formation and disciplines teachings must adjust themselves to reflect a biblical view of sanctification; one that is God-centered and not man-centered.

The Church must heed this call to return to the biblical understanding of sanctification. This precludes the modern evangelical infatuation with spiritual formation and disciplines teaching. In an age of increasing spirituality the Church most especially must be on the alert for false doctrines and deception that is a part of the time leading up to the return of Jesus Christ. Spiritual deception results in widespread apostasy precisely because it appears to be genuine God-honoring expressions of worship. Evangelicals must be reminded that Luther and the Reformers were driven to the point of despair in their efforts to achieve holiness by their own

²²Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1995), 319.

efforts. In their despair however God drew near to them and gave them an understanding that salvation and sanctification came by His grace through faith alone. We can draw near to God as the writer to the Hebrews states²³ but it must be on God's terms, not terms of our own making.

²³Hebrews 4:16.

Selected Bibliography

Carson, Donald A. S 1994. When Is Spirituality Spiritual? Reflections on Some Problems of Definition. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*. 37 (3):381-394.

Catholic Church. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. New York: Doubleday, 1995.

Porter, Steven L. S 2002. On the Renewal of Interest in the Doctrine of Sanctification: A Methodological Reminder. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*. 45 (3):415-426.

Rakestraw, Robert V. Je 1997. Becoming Like God: An Evangelical Doctrine of Theosis. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*. 40 (2):257-269.

The New American Standard Bible Updated Edition *The Lockman Foundation*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1995.

Whitney, Donald S. *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. Colorado Springs, Colo: NavPress, 1991.

Willard, Dallas. *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988.

Yungen, Ray. *A Time of Departing: How Ancient Mystical Practices Are Uniting Christians with the World's Religions*. Silverton, Or: Lighthouse Trails Pub. Co, 2006.