

# Sanctification by grace: theological understanding and missiological implications for a Latin American context

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**Abstract:** Christian sanctification is central to living as disciples of Jesus Christ. Moreover, the foundation of God's grace is vitally important for God's people to be set apart as his servants. However, it is all too easy for Christians, perhaps especially including in Latin America, to fall into striving to become more Christlike only through their own efforts at following a set of rules or moral codes. The centrality of God's grace needs to infiltrate and inform Latin American society, church life, and leadership.

## Introduction

Sanctification by grace is not a smooth issue to preach and teach in many contexts, especially so in many parts of Latin America. On one hand, pastors and leaders in some Christian movements strive to see change in the life of believers by overemphasizing an unbalanced weight on human effort, imposing many kinds of behavioral requirements, even beyond Scriptural rule, alongside disciplinary actions for not obeying the church leaders' commands. On the other hand, some Christian movements leave sanctification solely to the realm of the believers' own personal relationship with God, underestimating the role given the church to instruct (Rom. 15:14), admonish (Col. 3:16), and "spur one another on toward love and good deeds" (Heb. 10:24).

Especially in many parts of Latin America, we cannot avoid being influenced by the slippery slope built up by two extremes exhibited by a large number of Christian movements: a legalistic approach (Spanish: *enfoque legalista*) to sanctification oriented to mould ourselves by our own effort to please God, and an antinomian view (Spanish: *postura antinomista*) of sanctification that leads Christians to not care about having their life transformed since God will pardon their sins anyway at the end times. The former approach may be seen mostly in charismatic movements, while the latter finds its place largely among traditional and more liberal groups. Legalism attempts to reinforce the idea of sanctification diminishing the importance of grace, trying to force believers into certain ethical standards to please God and others. Antinomianism (Spanish: *Antinomismo*) mistakenly overemphasizes grace, misunderstanding God's will through sanctification, in a way that the ethical principles outlined in Scripture are despised.

Due to these reasons, it is of great importance to hold a healthy biblical perspective and adequate comprehension of the concept of sanctification by grace, fully understanding its missiological implications. For this study, conclusions will be drawn particularly from the setting in Argentina, but the overall analysis can be compared to other Latin American contexts.

## 1) Theological understanding of sanctification by grace

The English term sanctification derives from the Latin words *sanctus* (holy) and *facere* (to make), and thus its literal meaning is “to make holy.” The Hebrew (שׂוֹפֵר) and the Greek (ἅγιος) roots are applied in Scripture to any person, place, occasion, or object that is set apart from common, secular use, as devoted to God or other deities. For the purpose of this article, the focus will be on sanctification by grace of God’s people.

Due to the theological concept of the order in salvation known as *Ordo Salutis*, sanctification is sometimes understood as an addendum to justification; yet according to Scripture, justification and sanctification are not separate in time (1 Cor 6:11). Sanctification is not merely the completion of justification; it is justifying faith at work. As such, it is not only a declaration that God makes concerning the believers’ status, but also a commitment to work in believers to bring them to Christ’s image.

Leviticus 20:26 (also quoted in other places such as 1 Pet 1:15-16) contains both a declaration and an exhortation from God to his people: “You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.” God is declaring his own holiness and his decision to separate Israel as a holy people. But He is also exhorting Israel to be holy.

This sanctification is not a status we obtain by being good and obedient believers, because we could never fulfill God’s requirements by ourselves. We can only acquire sanctification in our union with Jesus Christ. As Sinclair Ferguson puts it with marvelous clarity, “In Christ’s incarnate, crucified, risen and glorified humanity lies the sanctification I lack in myself.”<sup>1</sup>

Sanctification can usually be distinguished in three stages: it begins at regeneration, it increases throughout life, and it is completed at death or when the Lord returns. These stages of sanctification create a tension in its comprehension and application. “Israel *is* inherently holy, separated by God from ‘the peoples’ to be his own. Yet Israel must *become* holy, by obedience, fit for the privilege allotted her.”<sup>2</sup> These two aspects or nuances of sanctification must remain in its healthy and biblical balance: sanctification as a status conferred and as a process pursued.

### a) Positional and progressive sanctification

Theologians have given many names to these two aspects of sanctification that remain in tension. Positional sanctification (also named objective, judicial, definitive or indicative) refers to the believer’s present status before God as holy (Rom 1:7; Eph 1:1). Progressive sanctification (also named subjective, practical, experiential or imperative) refers to the process by which believers, as partakers of God’s holiness and empowered by the Spirit of Christ, become more holy and spiritually mature (Heb 6:1, James 1:4).

**Sanctification as a status conferred:** Christians are set apart for God’s use: ‘sanctified... saints’ (1 Cor 1:2) in this sense indicates status, not character; as well as ‘chosen... destined... sanctified’ (1 Pet 1:1-2). This is usually the meaning in Hebrews: ‘we have been sanctified... are sanctified’, not by moral transformation, but by the sacrifice of Christ ‘once for all’ (Heb 10:10, 29; 2:11; 9:13-14; 10:14; 13:12). The author sees men and women formerly defiled and banned from the Temple; these believers are now accepted and their sins expiated. They are now set apart to serve God as priests, all by the sacrifice of their High Priest. So also

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<sup>1</sup> Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 51.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Elwell, ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 969.

for example in 1 Cor 6:11, Paul, recalling conversion, states that believers have been washed, sanctified, and justified. Christ is our sanctification (1 Cor 1:30) and the church is sanctified (Eph 5:25-26). Sinclair Ferguson summarizes this aspect of sanctification stating, “in relationship both to sin and to God, the determining factor of my existence is *no longer my past. It is Christ’s past.*”<sup>3</sup>

**Sanctification as process pursued:** Yet even in Hebrews the concept of morality emerges. ‘Strive for sanctity/holiness’ (Heb 12:14). This is the most common and general understanding of sanctification in Argentina, referring to the growth in holiness that should follow conversion (Eph 1:4; Phil 3:12). So Paul prays that the Thessalonians be sanctified wholly –spirit, soul and body being kept sound and blameless- as something still to be accomplished. Paul says in his first epistle to the Corinthians that sanctification is the will of God for them in the special matter of sexual chastity (1 Cor 4:3-4). The Romans are exhorted to ‘present their bodies... holy...’ in their worship (Rom 12:1-2); and in 1 Corinthians 6:13-14 the body of the Christian must be kept from immorality because every Christian is a sacred (i.e., sanctified) person, belonging to Christ. ‘Let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God’ (2 Cor 7:1). Other important passages referring to progressive sanctification are 1 Thess 5:15, 1 Tim 6:11, and 2 Pet 3:18.

Sanctification is thus seen as understanding and living the Christian faith. Clarifying this aspect of sanctification, Louis Berkhof explains, “Sanctification is not, like justification, a legal act of God, but a moral and re-creative activity, by which the sinner is renewed in his inner being and made to conform ever-increasingly to the image of God.”<sup>4</sup>

#### **b) The role of grace in sanctification**

Having delineated what sanctification means, it still remains the need to understand how it operates. How are believers sanctified, made holy? The Bible states that the only means to be sanctified is the grace of God. There is no way that we can become holy by ourselves. We uphold that the grace of God is needed throughout the whole process of sanctification, from the beginning at regeneration until its completion. Demarest explains it stating, “the Spirit makes those who are holy in *principle* (i.e., positionally sanctified by grace) holy and godly in *practice* (i.e., experientially sanctified in word and deed).”<sup>5</sup>

The traditional meaning of grace is that of an undeserved blessing freely bestowed on man by God. Jonathan Edwards stressed the necessity of grace in sanctification infusing the habits of virtue. We conclude this section emphasizing that apart from the grace of God, there is nothing believers can do to be made holy.

#### **c) The role of human beings in sanctification**

Although by grace, sanctification is not imposed in believers in such a way that they remain completely passive receiving new clothing. The role of human beings in the process of sanctification by grace has been largely debated. Theologian Louis Berkhof introduces the debate stating,

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<sup>3</sup> Archibald Alexander, 57.

<sup>4</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1933), 267.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1997), 385.

God and not man is the author of sanctification. This does not mean, however, that man is entirely passive in the process. He can and should co-operate with God in the work of sanctification by a diligent use of the means which God has placed at his disposal.<sup>6</sup>

Demarest also explains it clearly, “Sanctification involves both God’s provision and the Christian’s participation... Although the initiative in sanctification is with God, necessary also are the believer’s willing and working.”<sup>7</sup>

We can find throughout Scripture many passages where believers are exhorted to live in a holy manner. Christians are called to be obedient to God and follow Christ’s example of life. Anthony Hoekema summarizes this tension as follows: “We may define sanctification as that gracious operation of the Holy Spirit, involving our responsible participation, by which He delivers us as justified sinners from the pollution of sin, renews our entire nature according to the image of God, and enables us to live lives that are pleasing to Him.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Berkhof, 267.

<sup>7</sup> Demarest, 402.

<sup>8</sup> Dieter, 61.

## **2) Missiological implications for a Latin American context**

Because sanctification deals with people's lives, not only inwardly but also outwardly, it may be unwise to treat the issue only as a theoretical matter. We cannot speak of sanctification without considering its practical and contextual implications in life and ministry. The biblical and healthy concept of sanctification by grace viewed as a balance between legalism and license, nomianism and antinomianism, is difficult to find, at least in my Latin American context, Argentina.

### **a) Sanctification, society and ethical challenges**

Sanctification deals with ethical challenges that can change in different contexts and as generations pass. Although as Christians we uphold the centrality of the Bible as the rule of faith and practice, the relevance of its message for today and its interpretation will always depend on the specific contexts. Culture has dramatically changed over the centuries and it is now changing even faster. So it would be useless to speak of the implications of sanctification, which implies ethical principles, without understanding today's way of life and focusing on the specific contexts for ministry. For example, in Argentina and in many other places in Latin America, nobody wants to be told what to do and what not to do. Respect for authority has been undermined and everyone's ideas are considered equally valid.

Francis Schaeffer suggested that the Christian-dominated consensus was weakened, and thus two impoverished values were adopted: personal peace (living one's life with minimal possibilities of being personally disturbed) and affluence (an overwhelming and ever-increasing prosperity). Although Francis Schaeffer wrote to a previous generation and in a different context, his remarks are still relevant today. He explains the lack of absolutes in such a clear way that I cannot avoid quoting him directly:

Frederick Moore Vinson (1890-1953), former Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, spelled out this problem by saying, "Nothing is more certain in modern society than the principle that there are no absolutes." All is relative; all is experience. In passing, we should note this curious mark of our age: The only absolute allowed is the absolute insistence that there is no absolute.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, he concluded that once the Christian consensus is taken out of the picture, we are left with only three sociological alternatives: Hedonism (in which everyone does what he or she pleases, which leads to chaos), the absoluteness of the 51-percent vote (which implies the majority's dictatorship), and one man or an elite giving authoritative arbitrary absolutes.

### **b) Sanctification in Latin American ecclesiastical and missiological context**

At present, Christian movements in most parts of Latin America are largely influenced by two very different practical approaches to sanctification and ethical principles. For the purpose of this article, we will be reflecting on the practical approaches instead of theological doctrines in relation to sanctification. The reason for this might be obvious: what a church or movement declares in paper does not necessarily reflect on what is preached and taught. Moreover, what influences people's lives most is not so much a doctrinal position, but their leaders' teaching and practical understanding of how a Christian should lead his life. Furthermore, any researcher can find out the theological stance of any Christian movement in regards to any issue, but only an

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<sup>9</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *How should we then live?* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming Revell Company, 1976), 217.

insider can come to understand and perceive the ways in which those theological views are applied in a certain context.

Having this caveat in place, we may affirm that Christian movements in most parts of Latin America include two main approaches in reference to the ethical life expected of a Christian person and the leaders' attitude towards their responsibility of teaching the biblical principles. These approaches reflect the two traditional theological positions known in church history as nomianism and antinomianism. But again, the purpose of this study is not to analyze and describe the theological understanding of those different views. Instead, we will focus on how Christians may perceive their leaders' teaching to influence in their lives.

On one hand, most traditional and historical Christian movements in Latin America, mostly influenced by postmodern thinking, may fall under the category of antinomianism. In practical terms, this position may overemphasize that God's love covers all sins, and thus, underestimate and misinterpret the Bible's passages that exhort Christians to lead godly lives. This view is usually known to overemphasize the positional view of sanctification to the detriment of the progressive aspect. A natural consequence of this teaching is to have Christians not concerned with the ethical principles included in the Gospel and expected of every believer.

On the other hand, the last decades have witnessed a growth of movements in most parts of Latin America that can be described as a more legalistic approach comparable to nomianism. Leaders in these movements are usually described as imposing a high standard of ethical living, thus augmenting the sense of guilt of humble believers. Naturally, and unlike the movements described as antinomian, these movements tend to overemphasize the progressive aspect of sanctification beyond the positional aspect. These teachings usually go even beyond the ethical principles exposed in the Bible to include more specific pseudo pharisaic impositions on followers. In many cases, this is the way some leaders in Argentina and other Latin American countries are converted into what could be called evangelical dictators.

### **c) The challenge for Latin American Christian leadership**

In their attempt to maintain a healthy balance between both positional and progressive aspects of sanctification, Christian leaders are challenged to teach the biblical ethical principles that believers are called to live in order to please God, without falling into the temptation of forcing an unnatural way of human conduct beyond the work of the Holy Spirit.

Something to learn from the apostle Paul is his humility in terms of his own fragility in reference to his life and leadership. Jonathan Edwards, commenting on 1 Corinthians 9:27, says, "The apostle did not only diligently seek heaven after he knew he was converted, but was earnestly cautious lest he should be damned."<sup>10</sup> Then, analyzing the character of the apostle Paul, Edwards mentions seven virtues toward God. The last one is: Caution in his accounting of himself. "We should follow the apostle in his great caution in giving an account of his experiences so as not to present more of himself in his words than men should see in his deeds."<sup>11</sup> This is a wise attitude a Christian leader should imitate.

The second consequence of the surrounding culture is its influence on believers. Since Christians are part of society, they are affected by these attitudes of despising any authority that tries to tell them what is right and what is wrong. First of all, it is the Christian leaders' responsibility to be intentional about teaching them the authority of the Bible, even if society

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<sup>10</sup> Edwards, 31.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 49.

does not agree. Secondly, we have experienced that although the Church is given by the Bible the delegated power of exercising authority and discipline with church members, those in need of discipline many times disregard the authority of the church and simply leave the community in quest of what they would consider a more understanding or open church.

The third consequence refers to the Church's testimony to the society. This is an ongoing debate: we want to be faithful to Scripture and, at the same time, not be criticized. As we seek to share the values of the kingdom of God, there exists the temptation to please society's demands by becoming lenient on ethical issues. We disregard that our most important objective is to please God and not men. We forget that we have His message to communicate, and not ours. If our missiological efforts are to bear fruit, our best strategy is always to be faithful to God.

If we are to apply the concept of sanctification in our lives and ministry, we should do it in the only way the Bible teaches: by grace. We deal here with another tension between being faithful to God by seriously repenting from sin and striving to avoid temptation, but also by learning to forgive ourselves as God lovingly forgives us. If holiness were the result of our effort, we would never achieve it. But because God is involved in the process, we can trust in Him and make our best effort to be good soil that is ready to receive the Holy Spirit's work in us. This receptive attitude towards God is the best way of caring for oneself and teaching the Gospel principles to others.

Theologian Hoekema expresses the healthy attitude to address this tension saying, "Though believers must not try to keep God's law as a means of earning their salvation, they are nevertheless enjoined to do their best to keep this law as a means of showing their thankfulness to God for the salvation they have received as a gift of grace."<sup>12</sup>

Being gracious to oneself and to others is the first step of teaching grace, but there are many things to take into consideration when we are intentional about sharing the biblical call for sanctification. If leaders are not careful to teach grace in its full dimension, they may end up losing credibility and authority, while being criticized for being too liberal or not caring. As Archibald Alexander puts it in an incredible quote:

To exercise unshaken confidence in the doctrine of gratuitous pardon is one of the most difficult things in the world; and to preach this doctrine fully without verging toward antinomianism [i.e., living without standards] is no easy task, and is therefore seldom done. But Christians cannot but be lean and feeble when deprived of their proper nutriment. It is by faith that the spiritual life is made to grow; and the doctrine of free grace, without any mixture of human merit, is the only true object of faith... Here, I am persuaded, is the root of the evil; and until religious teachers inculcate clearly, fully, and practically the grace of God, as manifest in the Gospel, we shall have no vigorous growth of piety among professing Christians.<sup>13</sup>

As Archibald Alexander expresses it, a considerable risk for grace teachers is to verge toward antinomianism, while trying to escape nomianism (i.e., legalism). The apostle Paul had to confront these two extremes when he addressed both the Galatians and the Romans. In Galatians 5:13, Paul uses the summary of the Law "Love your neighbor as yourself" from Leviticus 19:18 as a limitation to nomianism. He emphasizes that we ought to love instead of judge. But Paul

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<sup>12</sup> Dieter, 88.

<sup>13</sup> Archibald Alexander, 165-166.

uses the same quotation in Romans 13:9, where nomianism was not such an issue, possibly to address the excess of antinomianism. God frees us from any misconception by showing us in the Scriptures that “love is the fulfillment of the law” (Rom 13:10; Gal 5:14).

T. M. Moore, commenting on Edwards’s sermon *Hope and comfort usually follow genuine humiliation and repentance* says,

The pursuit of holiness can be a daunting and frustrating endeavor. One reason why this is so is that we discover in our journey of sanctification so much for which we need to repent, and so much which brings us trouble and humiliation. But God uses these experiences to advance us in our calling and bring us hope and comfort.<sup>14</sup>

When teaching sanctification by grace, we need to focus on the internal work of God and not only emphasize the external ethical consequences. In his analysis of Jonathan Edwards’s sermons, Robert Norris comments, “Edwards again offers a warning to much of modern thinking, where justification emphasized at the expense of sanctification leads to antinomianism, and sanctification emphasized at the expense of justification leads to moralism.”<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

Jonathan Edwards preached, “Gratitude for life in Christ draws out of the believer a desire for holiness, even as it creates in the believer a healthy hatred of the sin that mars our life and disfigures us.”<sup>16</sup> This is the feeling that leads us to accept the process of sanctification performed by God in our lives through grace. Christians and Christian leaders in Argentina and other Latin American countries might need to remember that true repentance renews our joy and the pursuit of a holy life pleases God.

Paul writes in Romans 12:1-2, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Scriptures make it clear that God does not want to leave us in the same condition in which we were when we were brought to Him. He wants to make us holy.

Scriptures also call us to ‘be on guard’ ... not only to avoid sin, but to be open to the work of the Holy Spirit in us at all times. The apostle Paul emphasizes that we are called to love God, love others, and love ourselves as a way of living the perfect balance between legalism and antinomianism. However, the way of achieving that balance and the holiness required from us as believers is not through our personal effort to be perfect. The only way of being made holy is glorifying God the Father, abiding in Christ, and allowing the Holy Spirit to do his work in us. We are not called to achieve perfection, but to diligently use all the means of grace provided by God as good stewards. Having in view a biblical understanding of sanctification by grace, Christian leaders in Latin America (as well as in other contexts) are called to review their role in teaching believers to lead godly lives, avoiding the temptation to overemphasize either the antinomian or the legalistic approaches.

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<sup>14</sup> Edwards, 99.

<sup>15</sup> Edwards, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Edwards, 3.



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