

Test the Claim: Is Sanctification a Process and Is It Synergistic? (That is a cooperative work done man and God jointly)

<https://youtu.be/2PxOBllh1T4>

If sanctification is truly a process by which a believer becomes increasingly holy through experience, discipline, or cooperation, then this claim must withstand careful examination. Scripture does not fear such examination; error does.

The following questions are raised to help us understand what sanctification truly is. During our 2025 mission to the Philippines, Bishop William Poloc asked the brethren whether sanctification is the work of God alone or the result of God and man working together. In theological terms is sanctification monergistic or synergistic? These questions therefore serve as theological tests. They bring to light the serious consequences that arise when sanctification is defined as a gradual process that depends on human effort, rather than as something that God Himself declares on the basis of Christ's finished work and then truly applies by His Spirit in the believer's life.

Modern synergistic teaching treats sanctification as something that slowly develops through cooperation between God and the believer, making human effort part of its foundation. By contrast, the biblical and historic understanding views sanctification as originating entirely with God. God alone is the declaring party, its source is Christ's finished work, and what God declares He effectually applies by the Holy Spirit, producing obedience and holiness as the result, not the cause.

Theological Test

Can a person become more holy—not merely more obedient, more informed, or more restrained, but more holy in himself? If holiness can be increased, then it must exist in degrees, fluctuate by conduct, and be capable of increase by effort. Scripture never speaks this way.

Believers are called “saints,” not “becoming saints.”¹

Is sanctification, unlike justification, a process? If justification is the once-for-all act of God declaring the sinner righteous, on what biblical grounds is sanctification transformed into an ongoing process dependent upon human cooperation for its advance? Scripture joins justification and sanctification inseparably in Christ, without redefining **one as declarative** and the other **as cooperative**.²

Did Jesus Christ increase in holiness? If sanctification means becoming holy, then either Christ progressed in holiness—which Scripture denies³—or sanctification must be understood differently. The members cannot be sanctified in a manner alien to their Head.

Can holiness be produced by abstention or restraint? Does a man become more sanctified by avoiding television, newspapers, cinema, or sporting events? Can holiness be achieved by clothing, speech patterns, posture, geography, or separation from sinners? Can prayer posture, prayer length, or physical withdrawal from society sanctify the conscience?

Can holiness be conferred by sacred times and observances? Is a believer more sanctified by keeping Sunday in a prescribed manner, by observing the Jewish Sabbath, or by festival days such as Christmas?

Can holiness be transferred from person to another or holiness gained by lying on the grave of a deceased saint.

If sanctification is progressive in its nature, then holiness must be accumulated by conduct, restraint, ritual, or discipline. Yet the New Testament explicitly denies holiness arising from food, drink, days, places, or ascetic practices.⁴

David Clarke prepared for Baguio Christ Centered Churches 30 January 2026

Please view the enclosed article on this subject accessed by the URL link at the bottom of this video.

Sanctification Under the Old Covenant and Its Fulfilment in the New

- To avoid confusion, a clear covenantal distinction must be made.
- Under the Old Covenant, sanctification frequently referred to **external setting apart**. Persons, places, times, and objects were designated as holy by divine appointment. The land of Israel, the tabernacle, the temple, the priesthood, the altar, vessels, garments, feast days, and Sabbaths were all sanctified—that is, separated from common use and devoted to God.⁵
- A table could be holy. A building could be holy. A garment could be holy. A day could be holy.
- Yet none of these sanctified the conscience or made a man inwardly holy before God.
- Scripture itself teaches that these sanctifications were **ceremonial, temporary, and typological**, belonging to ordinances “imposed until the time of reformation.”⁶ They pointed forward to Christ, but did not impart spiritual holiness.
- With the coming of Christ and the establishment of the New Covenant, this form of sanctification **ceases entirely**. The New Testament nowhere teaches that holiness attaches to: buildings or sacred places,⁷ lands or geography,⁸ food laws or abstentions,⁹ religious calendars or holy days,¹⁰ clothing, posture, or ritual acts.¹¹ Christ abolishes holiness tied to place: “Neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem.”¹²

Paul abolishes holiness tied to days and observances: “Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday.”¹³

The Epistle to the Hebrews abolishes ceremonial sanctification altogether by declaring the shadows fulfilled and set aside in Christ.¹⁴

Under the New Covenant, sanctification is no longer external or ceremonial. It is **personal, spiritual, and Christ-centred**. Holiness is found in **union with Christ**, not in separation from created things.¹⁵

Thus, while the term *covenantal sanctification* is not found in Scripture, the reality it describes—the movement from typological holiness under the Old Covenant to spiritual holiness under the Covenant of Grace—is plainly taught. The shadows have passed; the substance has come.¹⁶

To reattach holiness to ascetic practice, ritual observance, sacred places, or external restraint is not spiritual maturity. It is regression.

How this aligns with Confessions: Dort and the Baptist Witness

This covenantal and Christ-centred understanding of sanctification aligns precisely with the Reformed confessions.

The **Synod of Dort** teaches that God renews the will itself, so that obedience follows as the effect of grace, not as a cooperating cause.¹⁷ Sanctification is God's work in its origin, continuance, and efficacy.

The **First London Baptist Confession (1644/46)** presents sanctification as flowing necessarily from election, redemption, and effectual calling. Holiness is the fruit of union with Christ, not a project of cooperation between God and man. The **Gospel Standard Articles** make explicit what earlier confessional theology already implied by rejecting progressive sanctification when defined as moral improvement of the flesh or diminishing dependence upon Christ. They deny any doctrine that leaves the believer less needy, less dependent, or less a sinner in his own estimation.¹⁸

Growth in grace is affirmed—but as deeper dependence upon Christ, not as inward moral ascent.

Conclusion

Sanctification is not a process by which holiness is accumulated. It is the work of God whereby His people are set apart in Christ and made to walk in holiness by grace. It does not arise from abstention, ritual, discipline, or cooperation. Nor does it require modern explanatory categories to safeguard the doctrine of grace.

Where Scripture speaks clearly, theology must not multiply words.

God sanctifies His people. Therefore, they walk in holiness.

Grace reigns—from first to last.

Footnote Scripture References (KJV)

1 Corinthians 1:21 Corinthians 6:11 Hebrews 7:26 Colossians 2:20–23 Exodus 29:43–44; Leviticus 8:10–12 Hebrews 9:10 Acts 7:48 John 4:21–24 Romans 14:17 Galatians 4:9–11 Colossians 2:21–23 John 4:21 Colossians 2:16 Hebrews 10:1–10 Hebrews 2:11; 1 Corinthians 1:30 Colossians 2:17 Philippians 2:13; Dort Heads III/IV Gospel Standard Articles, Article on Sanctification

1. Appendix: Is Sanctification a Process?

Sanctification, as taught in Scripture and confessed by the Reformed churches, is not a process by which holiness is accumulated through human effort or cooperation. It is the gracious work of God whereby those whom He has justified are set apart in Christ and made to walk in holiness by sovereign grace.

The claim that sanctification is progressive in essence and synergistic in cause collapses under examination. If holiness increases by effort, then it must be capable of degree, fluctuation, and loss. Scripture never speaks this way. Believers are called saints—sanctified ones—not those becoming holy by process (1 Corinthians 1:2).

Under the Old Covenant, sanctification applied to persons, places, times, and objects. These were ceremonial, external, and typological (Hebrews 9:10). With the coming of Christ, such sanctification ceased. Holiness is no longer attached to geography, buildings, days, foods, or rituals (John 4:21–24; Colossians 2:16–23). The New Covenant knows sanctification only in union with Christ.

The Synod of Dort teaches that God renews the will itself, so that obedience follows as the effect of grace, not as a cooperating cause (Philippians 2:13). The First London Baptist Confession (1644/46) presents sanctification as flowing necessarily from election and redemption. The Gospel Standard Articles explicitly reject progressive sanctification when defined as moral improvement of the flesh or diminishing dependence upon Christ.

Growth in grace is real, but it is not moral ascent. It is deeper dependence upon Christ, greater self-abasement, and increased reliance upon sovereign grace.

God sanctifies His people; therefore, they walk in holiness. Grace reigns—from first to last.

2. Added Confessional & Reformation Citations

Scripture (KJV)

- 1 Corinthians 1:2 — believers addressed as sanctified
1 Corinthians 6:11 — washed, sanctified, justified (joined acts)
Hebrews 9:10 — ceremonial ordinances imposed until reformation
Hebrews 10:10, 14 — sanctification accomplished in Christ
Colossians 2:16–23 — rejection of holiness tied to days, foods, asceticism
John 4:21–24 — holiness no longer attached to place
Philippians 2:13 — God working will and deed
Confessional Synod of Dort, Heads III/IV — regeneration and renewal of the will by God alone

- **First London Baptist Confession (1644/46)**, Articles on Calling & Sanctification
- **Gospel Standard Articles**, Article on Sanctification — explicit rejection of progressive sanctification as moral improvement
- **Reformers John Calvin**, *Institutes* III.3–5 Sanctification flows from union with Christ; mortification is God’s work in us, not cooperation as cause.
- **Martin Luther**, *The Bondage of the Will* All spiritual good, including obedience, flows from grace alone; the will is acted upon, not acting independently.
- **John Gill**, *Body of Doctrinal Divinity*, Book V Sanctification is God’s work alone; growth in grace is deeper dependence, not fleshly improvement.

1. Martin Luther Aligned with Dort and the First London Baptist Confession (1644/46)

The doctrine of sanctification taught by **Martin Luther** stands in clear harmony with the later confessional formulations of the **Synod of Dort** and the **First London Baptist Confession**. All three affirm that sanctification flows necessarily from justification, is inseparable from union with Christ, and is wrought by God alone in its cause and efficacy. While real obedience is produced in the believer, it is never treated as a contributing cause to holiness, but solely as its fruit and evidence. Dort teaches that God renews the will so that the believer acts willingly, yet always by grace, not cooperation. The First London Baptist Confession likewise grounds sanctification in election, redemption, and effectual calling, refusing to treat holiness as a cooperative project between God and man. Luther anticipates this confessional clarity by insisting that the believer remains wholly dependent upon Christ, never advancing in holiness by moral improvement of the flesh. Thus, Luther, Dort, and the First London Confession stand united in guarding sanctification as **monergistic in**

cause, evangelical in character, and Christ-centred in assurance.

2. Sharp Contrast with Modern Progressive Evangelical Sanctification

Modern evangelical theology frequently departs from this confessional framework by redefining sanctification as a **progressive moral process** in which the believer increasingly becomes holy through cooperation with the Holy Spirit. Though grace is affirmed verbally, sanctification is often described as advancing through discipline, obedience, spiritual habits, and personal effort. Human activity is no longer treated merely as fruit, but as part of the mechanism by which sanctification progresses. This introduces synergistic language foreign to the Reformation and confessional tradition. By contrast, Luther explicitly rejected the notion that sanctification consists in inward moral ascent or improvement of the old nature. The flesh remains flesh until death. Growth in grace, properly understood, is not moral elevation but deeper repentance, greater humility, and increased reliance upon Christ. Where modern progressive theology measures sanctification by visible moral improvement, the confessional doctrine measures it by **dependence upon grace**. Where modern systems encourage confidence in progress, Luther and the confessions direct the believer outward to Christ alone.

3. Tagalog Preaching Translation (Luther on Sanctification)

Tagalog (Preaching Cadence): Ang aral ni Martin Luther tungkol sa pagpapabanal ay malinaw: ang kabanalan ng Cristiano ay hindi bunga ng pakikipagtulungan ng tao sa Diyos, kundi gawa ng Diyos lamang sa pamamagitan ni Cristo.

Ang mananampalataya ay sabay na matuwid at makasalanan. Matuwid siya kay Cristo. Ngunit sa kanyang sarili, siya ay mahina, makasalanan, at lubos na umaasa sa biyaya.

Ang pagpapabanal ay hindi pag-angat ng laman. Hindi ito unti-

unting pagbuti ng dating pagkatao. Ito ay araw-araw na pagsisisi at patuloy na pagbabalik kay Cristo sa pananampalataya.

Ang mabubuting gawa ay hindi dahilan ng kabanalan. Ang mga ito ay patotoo lamang na ang biyaya ay kumikilos na. Hindi tayo nagiging banal sa pamamagitan ng disiplina, ritwal, o pagsunod sa kaugalian, kundi dahil tayo ay kay Cristo na.

Ang kabanalan ay wala sa atin. Ito ay nasa Kanya. At dahil dito, ang biyaya ang naghahari—mula simula hanggang wakas.

4. Tight Polemical Paragraph

Martin Luther rejected every notion of sanctification as a cooperative or progressive moral process. He taught that the believer is righteous in Christ and sinful in himself, and that sanctification consists not in improving the flesh, but in daily repentance and continual dependence upon grace. Good works follow faith as its fruit, not as a means of becoming holy. This monergistic doctrine stands in full agreement with the Synod of Dort and the First London Baptist Confession (1644/46), and stands in direct opposition to modern evangelical systems that recast sanctification as a synergistic process of moral advancement. Where such systems look inward for progress, Luther directs the soul outward—to Christ alone.

Confessional Contrast: John Calvin and Martin Luther on Sanctification

- **1. Fundamental Agreement (Shared Confessional Ground)** Both Calvin and Luther teach that: Sanctification flows **necessarily from union with Christ**
- It is **wrought by God alone in its cause**
- Human obedience is **real but never causal**

- The believer remains **entirely dependent on grace**
- The old nature is **never improved or sanctified**

In this sense, both stand firmly within what later confessions (Dort; 1644/46 London Baptists; Gospel Standard) articulate with precision: **sanctification is monergistic in causation, evangelical in character, and Christ-centred in assurance.** They differ **not in doctrine**, but in **pastoral framing and polemical target**.

- **2. Calvin's Confessional Framing of Sanctification**

Calvin presents sanctification **organically**, within the doctrine of **union with Christ**. Key emphases in Calvin: Sanctification is inseparable from justification, yet distinct. It is the **renewal of the whole man** by the Spirit

- Scripture speaks of a **real growth in grace**
- The “new man” increases in strength, while the flesh remains flesh. Obedience is the **necessary fruit** of grace, not its cause
- Calvin therefore uses language such as: *mortification and vivification renewal*.
- However—and this is decisive—Calvin **never locates progress in the flesh**, nor does he teach diminishing dependence upon Christ. Growth in grace means **greater humility, repentance, and reliance**, not moral self-elevation. Calvin's language is **structural and theological**, aimed at safeguarding: the reality of obedience, the continuity of grace, the integrity of Scripture's exhortations
- **3. Luther's Confessional Framing of Sanctification**
Luther presents sanctification **existentially and polemically**, within the doctrine of **justification by faith alone**. Key emphases in Luther: The believer is **simul iustus et peccator**

- Sanctification is lived out as **daily repentance**

- The old man is never reformed, only resisted. Holiness is never found within, but always in Christ. Any inward progress language is treated with suspicion. Luther therefore avoids: developmental language; internal measurements of holiness; “growth” terminology that could fuel confidence in self. His focus is relentlessly pastoral: to protect assurance; to prevent introspection; to crush merit-thinking; to keep faith fixed on Christ alone. Luther’s language is **experiential and polemical**, aimed at guarding the conscience from: legalism; enthusiasms; synergism.

• 4. Why Calvin Can Speak of “Growth” and Luther Resists It

- This is the **key point of harmony-with-distinction**: Calvin allows the term *growth in grace* → but defines it **confessionally** as increasing repentance and obedience flowing from grace.
- **Luther** avoids the term → because in pastoral reality it was already being abused to suggest moral ascent.

Both reject: improvement of the old nature; diminishing dependence on Christ’s sanctification as a cooperative process. Thus, **Luther guards the conscience**, while **Calvin guards the system**—but both defend the same gospel ground.

• 5. Alignment with Dort, 1644/46, and Gospel Standard

Later confessional theology effectively **holds Calvin’s structure with Luther’s severity**. **Dort**: God renews the will itself; obedience flows necessarily but causation remains divine.

- **1644/46 London Baptists**: sanctification flows from effectual calling, not cooperation.
- **Gospel Standard Articles**: explicitly reject progressive sanctification defined as moral improvement or reduced

dependence

In this sense, the Gospel Standard position is **more Luther-like in tone**, while remaining **Calvinistic in doctrine**.

6. One-Paragraph Confessional Summary

Calvin and Luther teach the same doctrine of sanctification, though with differing emphasis. Calvin frames sanctification within union with Christ and allows carefully defined language of growth, while denying any improvement of the flesh or cooperative causation.

Luther, confronting pastoral abuse and legalism, speaks more sharply, defining sanctification as daily repentance and unbroken dependence upon Christ. Both reject synergism, both deny moral ascent of the old nature, and both locate holiness entirely in Christ.

The later confessions—Dort, the First London Baptist Confession (1644/46), and the Gospel Standard Articles—stand firmly within this shared ground, combining Calvin’s theological structure with Luther’s pastoral severity.

