

Preamble

Sanctification is one of the great Bible words. More, it is one of the leading doctrines of the new covenant. Coming closer to home, it is one of the many rich blessings enjoyed by believers as spelled out by Paul in the soaring, sublime list with which he opened his letter to the Ephesians (Eph. 1:3-14):

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory (Eph. 1:3-14).

‘God... chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him’; that is, that his elect should be sanctified.

Alas, however, sanctification is also much misunderstood. Consequently, it has been a source of heated controversy among the Reformed and evangelicals for centuries, right down to the present day.

What does the New Testament mean when it talks about ‘sanctification’? The root meaning of the word is ‘separation’:

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‘separation to God, separation from the profane, separation from the pagan, dedication to God’; thence, its corresponding verb ‘to sanctify’ means ‘to make or declare sacred, to purify, to consecrate’.

We get a vital insight into the meaning of ‘sanctification’ by Christ’s own sanctification. Yes, Christ was sanctified! As the Lord Jesus told us, when speaking of himself in terms of his incarnation and his subsequent work as a man, God the Father sanctified his Son: ‘Him whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world’ (John 10:36). Moreover, Christ sanctified himself to that work in order to save – to sanctify – his elect. As he declared in his great prayer just before his crucifixion (and how poignant this is!): ‘For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified’ (John 17:19).¹ Clearly, this use of ‘sanctification’, this sanctification of Christ, the sinless one (John 8:46; 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 7:26; 1 Pet. 2:22; 3:18), has nothing whatsoever to do with the removal of sin and making holy. Rather, it speaks of Christ’s separation, his dedication to his Father’s will, his being set apart for his work as his people’s Mediator. The Father sanctified his Son – set him apart – to this task,² and Christ separated himself to the task of redeeming his elect. Furthermore, by his experience as a man under the law, Christ was set apart as – that is, designated, made, constituted – the

¹ Clearly, by ‘sanctification’ here – ‘that they... may be truly sanctified’ – Jesus includes all of what we know by the phrase ‘being saved’. Incidentally, this puts the Judaisers’ demand on the first believers in proper perspective: ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved... It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses’ (Acts 15:1,5). To be ‘saved’ inevitably includes sanctification. It cannot be limited to justification; it must not be limited to justification. This, of course, puts the Reformed – who claim that the believer is under the law for sanctification – firmly on the side of the Judaisers, and against Paul. See my *Christ* p88.

² John 10:36 (NIV) has ‘set apart’. Compare: ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations’ (Jer. 1:5). See also John 17:17,19, NIV footnote.

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perfect Mediator, the complete Redeemer, the high priest of his people, the one who would offer himself as the sacrifice for their sins in order to save them:

For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source³... Every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins... And no one takes this honour for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was. So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him: 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you'; as he says also in another place: 'You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek'. In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek (Heb. 2:10-11; 5:1-10).

From all this, we learn the root meaning of 'sanctification'; namely, separation. As we, as believers, contemplate Christ's sanctification, Christ's separation to the work of our salvation (including our sanctification), therefore, the more we appreciate our own sanctification, and the way in which we ourselves are sanctified. For it is in and through the work of Christ, by the operation of the Holy Spirit, that the elect are themselves set apart by the Father's sovereign decree, set apart as his people, set apart from pagans, set apart from sin and darkness, delivered from the domain of Satan, and set apart unto God. Indeed, note the use of 'made perfect' in the above. Christ was sanctified; that is, he was perfected. And he yielded

³ 'Both he who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one' (NKJV – most literal). 'Both he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father' (NASB). 'He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source' (ESV).

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his perfect life in the perfect sacrifice of himself and so wrought perfect salvation for his people: 'By a single offering [Christ] has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified' (Heb. 10:14). At the point of believing, all believers are sanctified, perfectly separated unto God.

As Paul declared to the Colossians:

The Father... has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Col. 1:12-14).

This, it goes without saying, is true of all believers, not just the Colossians in Paul's day. Every believer is released from Satan's domain, delivered, transferred into the kingdom of Christ, brought out of Adam into Christ, separated unto God. Every believer, therefore, is a saint. Every believer is sanctified. Every believer is set apart to God. Every believer is taken out of the world, effectively called out of the world. Hence the church is defined in the New Testament as the *ekklēsia*: 'the ones called out'. The fundamental idea of sanctification, I repeat, is that of separation, separation from the world, and separation unto God.

Now the New Testament speaks of the sanctification of believers in five ways. Hence the title of my book: 'Fivefold Sanctification'. In the new covenant, there are five distinct – but intimately connected – aspects of the believer's sanctification, which I will delineate as: purposed, accomplished, positional,⁴ progressive and absolute sanctification.⁵ I do not quarrel over the terminology, but the concept is vital. The believer's positional sanctification is what he is in Christ from the moment of his conversion. The believer's progressive sanctification is the working out, in daily life, of that positional sanctification he has in Christ, his growth and development in moral holiness, his increasing

⁴ Some would use 'definitive'.

⁵ I would have used 'perfect sanctification' but for the fact that the believer's positional sanctification is already perfect in God's sight.

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likeness to Christ,⁶ which, alas, in this life, will always fall short of perfection. The believer's absolute sanctification is the perfection in glory that will be his, and his for ever, at the appearing of Christ, his complete and entire sanctification.⁷ And all of it stems from that initial, determining counsel and decree of God to save, to sanctify, his elect – purposed sanctification – worked out by Christ on the cross – accomplished sanctification. It is these five aspects of the believer's sanctification in the new covenant that I want to explore in this book. 'In the new covenant', I stress: I want to set out the richness of the believer's sanctification within the terms of the new covenant.⁸

⁶ By the use of 'progressive', of course, there is no suggestion that the believer adds anything to Christ and his work, adds anything to his positional sanctification, in order to make him more acceptable to God, and so on. 'Progressive sanctification' is not a biblical term, and therefore I wish we did not have to use it, but it, or something like it, is essential. It is necessary because of the inadequate translation of *hagiasmos* and the failure of the translators (at times) to distinguish 'positional sanctification' and 'being holified'. Even this will not altogether work – sometimes the word 'sanctify' refers to both positional and progressive sanctification. As I have already noted, we have to get used to words taking different meanings and nuances. The context is king.

⁷ I deliberately use the seeming tautology to bring home the fullness of the believer's eternal sanctification.

⁸ It has been said that 'sanctification', as used by Paul, never means advance in the Christian life, but always refers to a definitive act of grace. Nevertheless, this definitive sanctification – or, as I call it, positional sanctification – always leads to the lifelong process of progressive sanctification. This could also be called 'transforming sanctification' (2 Cor. 3:18), from the verb *metamorphoō*. See Rom. 8:29, 'transfigured' (Matt. 17:2; Mark 9:2) or 'to change into another form' (Rom. 12:2). We cannot be positionally sanctified without inevitably being progressively sanctified. The provision of the new covenant ensures this: the new heart, mind, will, disposition – that is, regeneration – brings this (Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 36:26-27; Rom. 6:1 – 8:4; 1 Cor. 1:2; 6:11; 1 Thess. 4:3-8; Heb. 8:6-13; 10:14-18). At conversion we are regenerated (transforming) and justified (positional). We are also sanctified (combines both, positional and

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But in order to do that, we need to do what the New Testament so often does: to get to the heart of a matter, to illustrate it for the benefit of believers, it goes back to the old covenant.⁹ We know that one of God's great purposes in establishing the old covenant was to picture or typify the new covenant; the old covenant foretold the new, foreshadowed the new (Col. 2:16-17; Heb. 8:5; 10:1). We further know that God intended that this covenant should be temporary, to last until the coming of the Seed, Christ (Gal. 3:17-19). Christ, therefore, took the provisions, terms and shadows of the old covenant, and fulfilled them all, bringing all of them to full flowering in himself in the new covenant. Indeed, Christ is the new covenant (Isa. 42:6-7; 49:8). Christ is all (Col. 3:11). Christ himself fulfilled the old covenant. Fulfilled! What a word! It is one of the greatest words in the New Testament. Christ came into the world in order to fulfil the law, the old covenant in its entirety, to fully meet all its requirements and satisfy all its demands, to bring into effect all that it typified, and thus abolish it (Matt. 5:17-18; Acts 3:18; Rom. 7:4-6; 8:4; 10:4; Heb. 7:18-22; 8:6,13, for instance). Hence, the believer looks back *at* the law – not *to* the law – looks back at the law, not as his perfect rule, but as a most useful, and instructive paradigm,¹⁰ an illustration of the glories which are his in the new covenant brought in by Christ (1 Pet. 1:8-11). Nowhere is this more true than in the matter of sanctification.

In the old covenant, God sanctified Israel. That is, in eternity he chose Israel to be his people (Deut. 7:6-8; 10:15; Ps. 135:4; Isa. 45:4), electing Israel as his firstborn son (Ex. 4:22-23). Then, at his appointed and promised time (Acts 7:17), he delivered Israel from Egypt, making them into a

transforming). Note the perfect passive in 1 Cor. 1:2, speaking of a past event with permanent effect leading to holiness in character. Believers are sanctified and they are called to be sanctified (1 Cor. 6:11), the aorist passive speaking of a transitional and transformative event, once for all, but shown in life.

⁹ See my *Hinge*. Out of scores of examples, consider 1 Cor. 5:6-8; 9:7-14; Gal. 4:21 – 5:1; Hebrews *passim*, and so on.

¹⁰ See my 'The Law the Believer's Rule?'

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nation, forming them into his own special people (Ex. 19:3-6; Deut. 7:6; 26:16-19; 29:44-46; Ps. 114:1-2). Furthermore, within a few weeks he gave Israel his law – something he did for no other people (Deut. 4:1 – 6:25; 7:6-11; Ps. 147:19-20; Rom. 3:1-2; 9:4-5, and so on), thereby distinguishing Israel from all other nations (Eph. 2:14-15), *all* nations, not merely Egypt. In particular, he gave Israel the sabbath as the great, the unique, the distinctive marker, separating them from all the nations (Ex. 31:13-17; Ezek. 20:12,20).¹¹ In other words, God sanctified his chosen people, Israel, by delivering them from Egypt, forming them into his special, holy people,¹² and by giving them his law; in particular, the sabbath. God declared the same repeatedly. This is what Israel’s sanctification meant:

Above all you shall keep my sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you... Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel (Ex. 31:13-17).

I made myself known to them in bringing them out of the land of Egypt. So I led them out of the land of Egypt and brought them into the wilderness. I gave them my statutes and made known to them my rules, by which, if a person does them, he shall live. Moreover, I gave them my sabbaths, as a sign

¹¹ See my *Sabbath Questions* pp93-103. Calvin agreed: ‘The sabbath is a sign by which Israel might know that God is their sanctifier’ (Calvin: *Institutes* 2.8.29). And not only Israel! Every nation that came into contact with Israel would know it (see, for instance, Neh. 13:15-22).

¹² Not that all Israel was saved. Israel was elect as a nation, but not every Israelite was elected to everlasting salvation. See Rom. 9:6-18. The sanctification of Israel typified, foreshadowed, the saving of the elect by Christ: ‘The “redemption” or “salvation” of Israel was only a shadow of the real salvation in Christ in the new covenant. Deliverance from Egypt was not “salvation” in the full sense; it was only a shadow of the believer’s redemption in Christ, his deliverance from sin, law and death. Everything about Israel’s deliverance from Egypt firmly pointed to the reality; namely, Christ’ (taken from my *Sabbath Questions* p72).

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between me and them, that they might know that I am the LORD who sanctifies them (Ezek. 20:9-12).

Nothing could be clearer: God sanctified Israel, he separated Israel to himself. As he commanded Moses at the foot of Sinai, just before he gave him his law for Israel: ‘Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel’:

You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex. 19:3-6).

But that was not the end of it. God commanded Moses:

Go to the people and consecrate [sanctify] them... So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and consecrated [sanctified] the people; and they washed their garments... Also let the priests who come near to the LORD consecrate [sanctify] themselves, lest the LORD break out against them (Ex. 19:10,14,22).

Even the mountain itself was sanctified: ‘Set limits around the mountain and consecrate it’ (Ex. 19:23). I do not see how God could have made the position more clear or emphatic. Israel was sanctified that day before God at the foot of Sinai, sanctified as God’s holy people, separated unto himself.

Indeed, the entire history of Israel could be described in terms of sanctification – or its lack! See how often the words ‘sanctify’, ‘holy’, or related or connected words, are used of Israel throughout the Old Testament. Let me give the merest sample:

Aaron shall bear the names of the sons of Israel in the breast-piece of judgment on his heart, when he goes into the Holy Place, to bring them to regular remembrance before the LORD... You shall make a plate of pure gold and engrave on it, like the engraving of a signet: ‘Holy to the LORD’... Aaron shall bear any guilt from the holy things that the people of Israel consecrate as their holy gifts. It shall regularly be on his forehead, that they may be accepted before the LORD... And

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you... shall anoint [Aaron and his sons] and ordain them and consecrate them, that they may serve me as priests (Ex. 28:29-41).

They made the plate of the holy crown of pure gold, and wrote on it an inscription, like the engraving of a signet: 'Holy to the LORD'. And they tied to it a cord of blue to fasten it on the turban above, as the LORD had commanded Moses (Ex. 39:30-31).

And on that day there shall be inscribed on the bells of the horses: 'Holy to the LORD'. And the pots in the house of the LORD shall be as the bowls before the altar. And every pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be holy to the LORD of hosts (Zech. 14:20-21).¹³

All this has been fulfilled, in the new covenant, in Christ, and fulfilled for and in every believer.

Of course, we must not tie Israel and the *ekklēsia* too tightly together; the transfer is not complete. Israel was always a mixed multitude; the church on earth is the regenerate. Many covenant theologians, with their talk of the visible church and entrance into it (or into 'the covenant') by infant baptism, do tie the comparison of Israel and the *ekklēsia* far too closely. Nevertheless, as, under God, Moses brought Israel out from Egypt and gave her the law, so Christ delivered his elect from sin, and brought them under his law into the new covenant.¹⁴ The comparison and contrast is clear: 'The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (John 1:17). Again:

Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, who was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God's house. For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses – as much more glory as the builder of a house has more honour than the house itself... Now Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, but Christ is faithful over God's house as a Son (Heb. 3:1-6).

¹³ For more on 'holiness' and Israel see my *The Priesthood of All Believers* pp22-29.

¹⁴ See my *Hinge*; 'Exodus in Romans'.

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In fact, although it was God who brought the people out of Egypt (Ex. 6:7; 20:2; Lev. 11:45; 22:33, and so on), consecrating the people, making them holy (Ex. 31:12; Lev. 20:8; 21:15; 22:9,16,32, and so on), he used Moses to accomplish the task (Ex. 19:10,14; 29:1). In bringing in the new covenant, ‘by a single offering [Christ] has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified’ (Heb. 10:14). ‘Jesus... suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood’ (Heb. 13:12).

Indeed, the writer to the Hebrews is explicit and expansive on all this, dealing, as he does, with all the leading aspects of the old covenant – not only the part played by Moses, but by angels, the sabbath, the priesthood, the sacrifices, the altar, and so on – and showing with invincible cogency that while the old covenant was ineffective, merely a shadow, Christ has fully met and accomplished all that the old covenant foreshadowed, fulfilling the law in every aspect, and so perfecting his people in the new covenant. The writer did this because his readers were in grave danger of going back to the old covenant. He wrote to remind them that Christ, in every respect, is better than every aspect of the old covenant. He is the fulfilment of every shadow. Seeing this is such a vital matter, I must quote the inspired writer at large:

Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron? For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well... For on the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God... [The oath] makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant... The law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever (Heb. 7:11-12,18-19,22,28).

Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is

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enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second. For he finds fault with them when he says: ‘Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach, each one his neighbour and each one his brother, saying: “Know the Lord”, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more’. In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away (Heb. 8:6-13).

If the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our [or your] conscience from dead works to serve the living God. Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant (Heb. 9:13-15).

We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying: ‘This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds’, then he adds: ‘I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more’. Where there is

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forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin (Heb. 10:10-18).

We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood (Heb. 13:10-12).¹⁵

Could anything be more clear? As Peter also explained, believers are fully sanctified in Christ, separated unto God as his own special people. First, they were elected to be such, chosen, appointed, predestined to be sanctified as God's people:

To those who are elect... according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood (1 Pet. 1:1-2).

And this leads, of course, to their positional sanctification in Christ:

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Pet. 2:9-10).¹⁶

This is what the believer is in Christ in the new covenant. This is his positional sanctification. He belongs to the holy nation, the special, elect, distinguished and separated people of God.

¹⁵ Do not miss the stress on separation. Christ suffered outside the gate. He was separated; literally so, separated from the people, and from his Father (Matt. 27:46), suspended between earth and heaven. In him, in Christ's separation, his people have been separated unto God: 'Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires... Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world' (Gal. 5:24; 6:14).

¹⁶ I will return to this massive statement.

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As he believes, as he trusts Christ, he is at once and forever separated from the world, sin, death and darkness, separated unto God. He is sanctified.

And this, of course, is why Paul was able to tell the Romans:

I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 15:15-16).

It does not stop there. From the moment the sinner trusts Christ he is positionally sanctified. But in that same instant his lifelong progressive sanctification begins.

Sanctification, clearly, is written large throughout Scripture as one of the major aspects of the new covenant. It is high time I explored its fivefold nature. I will do so by setting out these five aspects of sanctification by means of New Testament extracts. Needless to say, since Scripture is not written in neat, self-contained boxes, there will be some overlap within these extracts. As we have seen already, some scriptures speak of more than one of these five aspects of sanctification.