

REVIEWS

A REVIEW OF SINCLAIR FERGUSON'S *DEVOTED TO GOD: A BLUEPRINT FOR SANCTIFICATION*

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Devoted to God by Sinclair Ferguson articulates an interrelated theology of the doctrine of sanctification. Ferguson identifies each individual biblical component of sanctification and like a crafted Russian Doll displays how they all fit together theologically. In a similar fashion to his *The Christian Life*, he walks his reader through the progressive journey of sanctification while displaying exegetical insights and pathways for progress.² This enriching and empowering look at sanctification is dynamically Christ-focused. The reader quickly begins to see Ferguson's foundation of this blueprint for sanctification is the person and work of Jesus Christ and how the believer's identification in His death and resurrection compels both being and becoming holy in this life and life eternal. Ferguson explains,

Each passage has its own context, emphasis, and level of exposition. But the underlying patterns of indicative and imperative, objective and subjective, negative and positive. They all have their foundation in that undergirding reality of union with Christ.³

Some authors become staples for students of the bible. Finding any opportunity to sit under their insightful teaching brings paradigms and phrases that help promote personal and spiritual development. For this reviewer, Sinclair Ferguson is certainly one of those authors. Ferguson is not an easy read, but it is accessible for everyday readers. *Devoted to God* provides for us a theology of the process of sanctification that harmonizes ten key passages to draw the reader through the progression of the Christian life.

Christians have been called to holiness, and the first biblical passage selected by Ferguson establishes the foundation of sanctification our justification and call to

¹ Joe Keller is the Director of Student Care and Professor at The Master's University in Santa Clarita, CA.

² Sinclair Ferguson, *The Christian Life: A Doctrinal Introduction* (Edinburg: Banner of Truth Trust, 2013).

³ Sinclair Ferguson, *Devoted to God: Blueprints for Sanctification* (Edinburg: Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), 111.

holiness in 1 Peter 1:1-25 (1-29). Ferguson presents to the reader his foundational premise: the Christian's holiness expresses God's image as humanity was created to reflect (Genesis 1:26-28; Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:9-10). Sanctification is not separate from the believer's justification, but represents God's glory through the individual and corporate expressions of holiness. Ferguson does a remarkable job unpacking the work of sanctification as a distinctively Trinitarian activity:

God the Holy Trinity is devoted to it, God the Holy Father has commanded us to pursue it; Christ the Holy Son has died to effect it; The Holy Spirit works in us to bring forth the fruit of it; Heaven itself is a world that is full of it.⁴

When God then commands holiness, the imperative works deep into the fabric of what it means to be redeemed humanity. Holiness as the fruit of sanctification, is not some spiritually healthy optional activity for the Christian, but is obedience to a command given by the justifying triune God. Ferguson presents that the beauty of holiness is derived from the design of how humanity was created to thrive and live.

Ferguson highlights the foundational indicative and imperative connection how sanctification is understood and pursued. The believer is irresistibly attracted to the beauty of holiness, but holiness will always be an offensive repellant to those who live in rebellion against it.⁵ This foundational understanding of both the universal and personal struggle of humanity sets the accurate context to pursue holiness and the rich promises for its reward.

Ferguson presents a strong case to the importance of the physical body in the process of sanctification through his exposition of Romans 12:1-2.⁶ In fact, Ferguson echoes of Jay Adams' earliest works as it related to the expression of sin and holiness in the physical body. Ferguson explains,

It is in our bodies that sin, and sinful tendencies, addictions, and habits have exercised their spirituality destructive influence on us. The effect of sin is felt in physiological ways, and manifests itself in what we do with

⁴ Sinclair Ferguson, *Devoted to God*, 29.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 21-25.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 31-53.

our bodies-with our eyes, hands, ears, lips, feet and every other part us. They are instruments of either sin or holiness. Through them we express what is in our heart. By them the core of our thinking feeling, desiring, and willing comes to expression.⁷

Ferguson does not disconnect his understanding of the body from Romans 1-11's spiritual indicatives relating to our justification. The reader should slowly navigate through these pages that develop the implications of sanctification on biblical counseling and discipleship. Ferguson strives to give thoughtful appeal to explain the embodied soul, but does not read like a biological determinist. He is arguing that the spiritual work of justification is realized in the expression of holiness through the whole person. However, the role and responsibility of the biological implications of spiritual development needs to be unpacked further.

The comprehensive nature of the believer's union with Christ is clearly and compellingly drawn out of Galatians 2:20.⁸ Ferguson uses what he calls the "prepositions of grace" as he unfolds the rich and wondrous reality of the Christians place "in Christ." The individual's identity "in Christ" provides the foundation of the believer's justification and the only pathway of progressive sanctification. Ferguson's compelling exegetical argument from the passage gives both help and hope to the reader. The implications of Galatians 2:20 are expounded further through Ferguson's explanation of Romans 6:1-14.⁹ Union with Christ specifies that the life we live is within the power of His resurrection and not within the power of death. Ferguson downplays the modes of baptism to emphasize the function of baptism toward the believer's visible union and identity with Christ. Baptism is the recognition that the believer has died to and been delivered from the dominion of sin and redeemed into the kingdom of God. The believer's expressions of holiness are the direct implications of that reality. Ferguson recognizes that positional holiness is true for every believer, the renewed mind to both understand and live out this reality is the pathway to true change and sanctification. Ferguson summarizes:

Now we are in Christ, 'set free from sin.' But it may take us some time to realize that we are new men and women in Christ. And lifelong vigilance

⁷ Sinclair Ferguson, *Devoted to God*, 41.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 55-69.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 71-91.

is now our calling, for the old way of thinking can linger long; the power of temptation has not been destroyed. We need to keep coming back to the teaching of the New Testament, and remind ourselves of the lives in terms of Paul's exhortation not to let sin reign.¹⁰

Several works that unpack these realities that give hope to counselees, but I would recommend that chapters 3 and 4 could be given as a helpful homework assignment to advance a counselee's understanding of the realities and implications of what it means to be and live "in Christ". Just as biblical counselors seek to help those under their care to know and live "in Christ," Ferguson rightly identifies that this is the foundation in the blueprint for sanctification. Dealing with the seemingly captivating implications of sin in the life of the believer can be disorientating at best. Ferguson helps the reader gain both understanding and practical encouragement to help the Christian understand that the internal conflict of the heart is encapsulated within a greater conflict. The conflict of the Christian life is found between the incompatibility of the realm of the spirit and the realm of the flesh. The resurrected life in Christ compels the Christian to live under the reign of the Spirit in a world dominated by the flesh. Ferguson unpacks Galatians 5:16-17 to examine the composite conflict between these two epochs exposing the battle ground for the believer.¹¹ The reader begins to fit together the gospel logic to build out progressive sanctification. Ferguson explains:

Addictions to the flesh has its manifestations in all specific additions of life, to alcohol, drugs, sport, money, sex, work, and a myriad of other forms of bondage. But believers have made the decision to reject it all. "Those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" that was a once for all actions when we came to Christ. But now its consequences have to be lived out on a daily basis. The future is a series of small decisions to live the new life and not to fall back into the old. Living in the Spirit therefore means a daily commitment to please Christ and not to please self.¹²

The Christian whose identity is with Christ, does not need to live under the reign of sin, but can walk in a manner worthy of the calling in Christ Jesus. The believer is not overwhelmed by submission to the world. Rather, those who identify

¹⁰ Sinclair Ferguson, *Devoted to God*, 91.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 93-109.

¹² *Ibid.*, 103.

themselves with Christ and baptized into His resurrection power are no longer are dominated by sin. Understanding this reality does not eliminate the conflict, but rather accurately identifies it.

The biblical counseling movement has looked to help people rightly understand the origin and context of their problems and to give them hope in the Gospel for change. It is impossible to solve problems on a false premise. As Ferguson rightly identifies, the accurate identification of the foundational issues relating to the struggles of the Christian life does not immediately eliminate the struggles, but it does give comprehensive hope and a pathway for change. Ferguson is a master theologian, and the reader benefits from his gifted ability to bring together exegetical insights to illuminate spiritual realities, while compelling the reader to practically live them out in the everyday dynamics of the Christian life. Union with Christ should cause the believer to disrobe actions and attitudes that are not consistent with their identity in Christ. Colossians 3 is considered an essential passage in the practice of biblical counseling. Ferguson's exposition of Colossians 3:1-17 gives both the indicative and imperatives of everyday life "in Christ" which sets a "new rhythm" of the Christian life within the public, private, every day and church contexts.¹³ It is an important passage to expound on the discussion of sanctification. While this text is critical to sanctification, Ferguson's material is lacking with regard to the interdependent role of the church that promotes sanctification in the life of the believer.

There are no real insights on the connected role of interpersonal mutual sanctification in passages such as 1 Corinthians 12:12-31; Ephesians 4:1-16; Hebrews 10:18-25; Romans 12:3-21. Ferguson does highlight the high call to the "one anothers" in Scripture and the priority and place of the believer's role in the local church:

There is no intimacy in the world deeper or closer than this: there is only one Christ and he dwells in each believer. We cannot get closer to each other than this! Here, then, is the often undetected secret of a fellowship that is growing in grace: The Christ who is all to each one is also the Lord of glory who indwells every one If we really thought this way about our fellow believers and saw them as people whom the Lord Jesus

¹³ Sinclair Ferguson, *Devoted to God*, 111-138.

dwells, would we not treat each other differently?¹⁴

However, I would appeal to have him further develop an appendix to discuss the practical dynamic of how the people of God minister to one another as a component of progressive sanctification.

Ferguson gives a compelling call to personal mortification as the active call to combat sin out of the realities of their union with Christ. Understanding the position and power of our union and identity in Christ leads to the new life in Him, awaiting for the future fulfillment of the promises in Christ. This mindset revealed in Romans 8:13 gives the Christian supernatural capacity put to death the deeds of the flesh.¹⁵ Mortification of sin is both the responsibility of the believer, and the requisite to living a life of holiness. Ferguson demonstrates that this is not behavioral modification that relies upon sheer willpower and self-control. Rather this gospel logic relies upon the work of the Holy Spirit to deal with the issues of the heart. Ferguson rightly identifies that true change and mortification of sin does not happen at the external behavioral level, but at the intentional motives and desires of the heart. The development of that commitment is expressed through the valuable role of confessing our sin to one another and asking for help.

If we are able to share our failure our sense of guilt and bondage with a fellow Christian whom we can trust absolutely, and to whom we can open our heart, then we break the power of the blackmail the truth is our in the presence of God, we are able to pray together honestly, forgiveness once again flows into our hearts. Yes, there may be shame, and sorrow, and tears, but there is also pardon, forgiveness, and new beginning, and the blessing of stronger bonds of fellowship.¹⁶

Ferguson does not simply examine the New Testament for the imperatives related to sanctification. He also addresses a historical challenge to the role of the Law of God in the life of the Christian. He builds a strong exegetical case out of Matthew 5:17-20 for the role of the law being a reflection of the design of humanity as God's image bearers.¹⁷ Humanity broken by sin could not keep the law: only perfect

¹⁴ Sinclair Ferguson, *Devoted to God*, 127.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 139-160.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹⁷ Sinclair Ferguson, *Devoted to God*, 161-188.

humanity divinely expressed in the person and work of Jesus Christ could fulfill the whole law. Therefore, we now receive the Law from the One who has fulfilled the law, and through the work of the Holy Spirit, our hearts are transformed to be able to obey and express the design and order of the law. Ferguson is exhorting the New Testament believer not to neglect the impact of the historical redemptive implications of the role and responsibility of the Law. By carefully understanding the complete revelation of God, the believer sees obedience to the law as freeing, and complete expression of humanity.

The Law that had formerly been a burden they felt unable to carry now seems transformed. Instead of feeling it pressing down heavily on their shoulders as they tried their best to keep it, the burden has been lifted almost as though the law itself is carrying them, and not the other way around. What has become their burden has become their pleasure.¹⁸

This chapter is theologically stimulating and practically encouraging. It is one of the most clear and concise explanations of the role of the law in the life of the believer that this reviewer has read. The counselor is enriched to have these theological underpinnings while caring for those in need. The counselor can help them see not just the law, but the whole of Scripture as our freeing implement toward life-giving obedience and not legalistic oppression.

The Christian life has a long range perspective, for this life and for life eternal. There is a direct relationship to our union with Christ and the perseverance required for the cumulative effect of progressive sanctification. In Hebrews 12:1-14, Ferguson presents Jesus as both the founder of our faith and the object of our faith.¹⁹ The perseverance of the believer to pursue holiness is accomplished in both remembering who we are in Christ and in placing our hope in the promises of Christ. As before, Ferguson further encouraged the believer to strive and pursue holiness and urge others to do the same.²⁰ This responsibility is an important reality to the ongoing interpersonal ministry of giving hope to those who are hopeless and weary in doing good. The ultimate goal of sanctification is not personal self-fulfillment, but to ultimately realize the complete expression of our union with Christ in the final

¹⁸ Ibid., 182.

¹⁹ Ibid., 189-212.

²⁰ Ibid., 212.

resurrection of the dead. In a beautiful crescendo, Ferguson binds together this gospel logic to its ultimate fulfillment in Romans 8:29.²¹ The completion of sanctification will occur when sinful humanity is entirely renewed to perfectly reflect the glory of God. The progress of sanctification in this life is but foreshadow of the glory that is to come in the resurrection. This look into Romans leaves the reader longing both to express these realities today and to yearn for the ultimate day when all things will be made complete and the race will be finished.

The rich exposition of these nine texts is complemented by countless references to puritan authors, hymns and cross-references. The Banner of Truth Trust's commitment to include references at the bottom of the page and not at the end of the book provide additional enrichment for the reader. This gives the reader the opportunity to seamlessly follow the supportive logic of the material without losing ground of the argument in hunting for references. Five appendices referenced in the flow of the chapters are short yet provide incredibly helpful insights on topics such as the role of the trinity in the Christian life, an explanation and implications that Christians have "died to sin" in Romans chapter 6 and an argument to honor the commandment for Sabbath Rest.²²

Ferguson is masterful in uniting themes and connecting truths together in categories that both illuminate the components and the sum of the whole of sanctification. This work is an essential reading for any Christian who desires to understand the "gospel logic" of progressive sanctification in the Christian life. It stands as an important work for the discipline of biblical counseling by giving a theological construct to frame the work of sanctification in the life of the believer. It takes the foundational doctrine of being "In Christ" and expositionally works out the biblical rhetoric. The biblical counselor is provided with the indicative framework to appeal to the imperative commands necessary for those dealing with the hardships of life. Ferguson's text is an excellent resource for a theological concepts for biblical counseling and theological education. It is not an easy read but well worth the time and investment. I would highly recommend reading this book.²³

²¹ Sinclair Ferguson, *Devoted to God*, 213-235.

²² *Ibid.*, 237-270.

²³ Sinclair Ferguson, *Devoted to God*, 277.