

***Sanctification (God's Passion for His People)*** by John MacArthur, Crossway Publisher, (Wheaton, IL, 2020). (23 Quotes selected by Doug Nichols.)

### **1. Holiness in Christ's Sheep.**

The Greek word translated "Overseer" in that verse [1 Peter 2:25] is *episkopos*, a word elsewhere translated "bishop". According to *Thayer's Lexicon*, it refers to "a man in charge with the duty of seeing that things to be done by others are done rightly." Christ as the chief Shepherd is the overseer, or guardian, of our souls--caring for us, protecting us, leading us, correcting us, and giving us nourishment, all with the ultimate goal of our sanctification.

The English word *pastor* also means "shepherd," of course, and every faithful pastor will have a passion for the holiness of Christ's sheep that measure that mirrors the desire of the Savior. [Page 12]

### **2. The Cost of Caring for God's People.**

Caring for the people of God is likewise an exhausting, never-ending series of wide-ranging duties that would tax any man's skill set. Virtually all pastors will at times be called upon to fill practically every role of service in the church from set up to clean up. In addition to teaching the word (his central and most important assignment), the pastor is burdened with a constant concern for the sheep. [Page 13]

### **3. The Sanctification of God's People.**

A pastor might be faced with wildly desperate duties in all one day--visiting prisoners in the morning and preparing sermons in the afternoon, with a stop in between to cuff comfort a grieving family. He has to be able to move gracefully from one task to the other and be skilled at all of them.

Despite the diversity of so many responsibilities, all those pastoral duties ultimately point to one clear and singular goal: the sanctification of God's people. [Pages 13 and 14]

### **4. The Doctrine of Justification.**

So the doctrine of justification is not only essential to write understanding of the gospel; it is the doctrine that ties all other cardinal truths together. John Calvin spoke of justification is the principle hinge of all religion. Martin Luther said it is the doctrine by which the church stands or falls.

The apostle Paul clearly had a similar perspective. He had an obvious affection for the doctrine of justification, because he brings it front and center every time he deals with doctrinal matters. In every one of his New Testament epistles he explains this doctrine,

defends it, defines it, illustrated, or otherwise gives it a high level of prominence. [Page 21]

## **5. Occupying the Pulpit for Self.**

Sadly, there are many in positions of church leadership today who occupy the pulpit for purely self-aggrandizing reasons. They may be motivated by greed, conceit carnal ambition, a lust for money and power, or desire for honor and applause. They preach themselves rather than Christ Jesus as Lord (2 Corinthians 4:5). They exploit people rather than serve them (2 Peter 2:3). And sometimes they are surprisingly crass and candid about their real objectives. I've catalogued some of the popular words pastors today like to use as self-descriptors. None of these words would ever have been used by Paul to describe his ministry. But they are commonly employed today, not only in pastoral resumés but also in want ads from churches seeking pastors. These adjectives therefore describe what many young men entering ministry today aspire to be. They've been told, and firmly believed, that in order to thrive in ministry, they must be *relevant, authentic, always agreeable, acclaimed, innovative, cool, contemporary, creative, clever, culturally savvy, fashionable, inclusive, imaginative, broad-minded, visionary, unconventional, iconoclastic, entertaining, extreme, woke* --or some combination of those qualities. [Page 30]

## **6. The Unity of the Body.**

The prayer for spiritual unity is a thread that runs through the whole chapter [John 17]. Jesus makes that request repeatedly, praying again and again “that they may be all one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us” (17:21); “that they may be one even as we are one” (17:22); and “that they may become perfectly one” (17:23). Such unity is possible only among sanctified disciples. So implicit in the requests for believers’ spiritual unity is the plea for their sanctification. The same thing is true regarding their joy, their preservation, and their Christ-like love. All of those things are necessary expressions of true holiness. The entire prayer therefore reflects the priority of sanctification as Christ’s will for his people. [Page 41]

## **7. Setting Us Free.**

Everything Christ did through his earthly life was to set us free from the bondage of sin so that we might become servants of righteousness (Romans 6:18). [Page 42]

## **8. Christlikeness in Every Believer.**

Christ passion for his people's sanctification sets the compass for a sound, biblical philosophy of ministry. This is a priority every competent, biblically qualified church leader will embrace. No one is truly fit to lead the church if he is indifferent about holiness, or if he neglects to instruct and encourage his people in a wholeheartedly

pursuit of sanctification. And, accordingly, every believer must earnestly aspire to grow in grace and Christlikeness with the recognition that this is Christ's constant prayer for--and God's ultimate design for--every believer. [Page 43]

### **9. All Genuine Believers Are Saints.**

Sanctification is absolutely essential to the life of faith--so much so that Scripture frequently treats holiness as the identifying mark of a true believer. Indeed, when the term *saints* (meaning “holy ones”) is used in Scripture, it refers not to dead luminaries and the church has formally canonized by two living Christians--all the redeemed without exception. Paul writes “to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints *together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ* (1 Corinthians 1:2). Notice that he's not talking about a special class of advanced sainthood. He's underscoring the truth that all genuine believers *are* saints--holy people. A person who is utterly unsanctified is no Christian at all, no matter what verbal confession of faith he or she might make. [Page 45]

### **10. Striving for Holiness.**

Thus Christ himself described Christians as those who put their faith in him and thereby made holy. Scripture is equally clear that those who are *unholy*—unrepentant sinners, devoid of any desire for righteousness and left lacking any true love for Christ--have no part with him. Real believers “strive...for the holiness without which no one can see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14). And unsanctified life is the mark of an unbeliever. [Page 46]

### **11. The Christian Life Is Not Easy.**

Scripture does not tell us to “let go and let God.” The Bible never promises any easy, automatic victory over sin and temptation. [Page 47]

### **12. Striving towards Sanctification.**

The notion that sanctification happens with no effort on our part when we passively surrender the fight is a popular, persistent myth--and it's a dangerously false doctrine. In fact, it is the very antithesis of what the Bible teaches. [Page 47]

### **13. Sanctification Is Missing from Today's Preaching.**

Despite the high priority given to the subject by Christ and by Scripture, sanctification is a conspicuously missing emphasis in today's evangelical preaching. [Page 48]

### **14. Young, Restless, and Reformed.**

All the renewed interest in these crucial doctrines has been a good and important development--as far as it went.

The title of a September 2006 article by Collin Hanson in *Christianity Today* gave this trend a nickname that stuck: “Young, Restless, Reformed.” The article (later expanded into a book) was published under the subtitle, “Calvinism is marking a comeback--and shaking up the church.

But some of the leading figures in the developing movement have not been able to break away from the crass pragmatism that dominated the evangelical movement in their parents’ generation. They are obsessed with anything hip or trendy, appropriating the fads and memes of popular culture--and justifying their pragmatism by telling themselves their redeeming the arts, engaging the culture , contextualizing being “missional”, or being “incarnational.” Young, restless evangelicals have a host of pet subjects and tropes like that. *Holiness* does not appear to be one of them, let alone the main one. [Pages 49-50]

### **15. Holiness = Legalism.**

By 2011, beer, cigars, and tattoos had become the de facto emblems of the Young, Restless movement instead of the reformed doctrines they profess to believe. Their literature, blogposts, podcasts, and sermons barely seemed to mention sanctification--except to dismiss every mention of holiness as a dangerous form of legalism. [Page 50]

### **16. Slaves unto Righteousness.**

True Christian liberty means deliverance from sin’s bondage and the law’s condemnation, not freedom from the law’s moral precepts. Having been set free from sin and death, we are now called to live as slaves of righteousness (Romans 6:18). [Pages 50]

### **17. Christian Maturity Is Rare.**

Maturity seems to be in rare supply in churches today. Church leaders--even middle-aged ones--tried to dress, talk, an act like adolescents. Multitudes raised in evangelical youth ministries (where the chief goal was to keep them entertained) never learned to think seriously about spiritual matters [Page 52]

### **18. Godliness Is Also Missing.**

The truth of sanctification together with words like *holiness*, *godliness*, and *Christ-likeness* are all but gone from popular Christian discourse. Rarely do you hear any popular preachers urge their people to be separate from the world, to deny fleshly desires, or to mortify sin and selfishness. Instead, following the popular strategies of pragmatism and seeker sensitivity, all the longings of the selfish human heart are being legitimized. The fads and entertainment of the world--along with some of the twisted moral values of the sexual revolution--are being incorporated into churches, because

pastors have been told these are necessary elements to attract people who otherwise have no interest in God. [Pages 53-54]

### **19. Personal Satisfaction from the Pulpit.**

Multitudes of nominally evangelical churches today are nothing more than psychological, sociological, pragmatic, anthropocentric community centers dressed in religious garb--or something more stylishly casual, like printed T-shirts and grungy, torn blue jeans. They used the name of Jesus as a token, but they believe success or failure hinges on their own cleverness. They measure their effectiveness by attendance figures or money in the offering plate. Their idea of worship is a mindless musical stimulation designed for emotional manipulation of the people rather than praise offered to God. Vague spirituality and nice-sounding platitudes replace biblical doctrine and true holiness. And the focus of the message is personal satisfaction rather than Spirit-empowered sanctification. People attend not because they love the truth and fear God, but because everything they see and hear caters to their love of self. [Page 58]

### **20. Antinomianism.**

There is a heretical view of sanctification that perfectly fits with such a pragmatic church-growth strategy. Historically, it's called the antinomianism. It starts with the denial that the moral precepts of God's law remain obligatory as a rule of life for Christians. It therefore creates a radical disjunction between behavior and belief, and it erroneously uncouples sanctification from justification. This doctrine implies that the moral demands of God's law are malleable, or that they are optional, or that they have been abrogated. Indeed, some of the more extreme antinomians have openly made such claims. [Page 62]

### **21. Both Legalism and Antinomianism Serve Self.**

The truth is, antinomianism and legalism are just two sides of the same coin. The legalist thinks he's spiritual because he observes the law; the antinomian thinks he's spiritual because he doesn't. Both define the Christian life *by what they do with regard to the law* rather than stressing the need for the Spirit's empowerment to conform us to Christ's likeness. The legalist may never be able to restrain the flash produced legalism (Galatians 5:17). And the antinomian who refuses even to hear the law because he thinks rules of any kind are a threat to his "liberty" is still in bondage to sin (Romans 6:15-16). Both legalism in antinomianism are hostile to the spirits work in sanctification. Both the legalist an antinomian will clash crash and burn. [Page 64]

## **22. Grace Is an Active Force.**

Grace is not static; Scripture describes it as an active force. Grace strengthens us (2 Timothy 2:1; Hebrews 13:9); it works in us (1 Corinthians 15:10); it produces faith and love in our hearts (1 Timothy 1:14); it gives us help in times of need (Hebrews 14:16) and it instructs us (Titus 2:11-12). [Page 65]

## **23. Sanctification of the Church Body.**

No pastor should imagine the size of his congregation is a measure of his effectiveness. A godly pastor can be satisfied with nothing less than the sanctification of his people. It's a goal that will never be fully achieved until we are finally glorified. [Page 68]