

BOOK OF MORMON

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Home

Who We Are

Discussion

Articles

Our Meetings

Contact Us

Writing Contest

The Doctrine of Sanctification

in the Book of Mormon

by

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This article is concerned with the Christian doctrine of sanctification and two significant questions. First, can this doctrine be identified in the Book of Mormon? Second, if it can be found there, do any Book of Mormon references to sanctification shed additional light on our understanding of the concept?

Our first task is to explain to a modern audience what sanctification is, in a traditional and Biblical sense. However, if we do that to the exclusion of another doctrine called justification, we will run into difficulties. Therefore, let us see if we can explain what both doctrines are, and then focus on our topic here, sanctification.

Here is our first working definition. Sanctification means to be set apart from an ordinary or worldly status, to a special purpose suitable to God. A problem of understanding arises in that modern thought in this area jumps ahead to the goal of sanctification and begins to contemplate holiness or people declared to be saints because of their exemplary lives. Such thinking bypasses

the New Testament understanding of sanctifying a person or a thing. At that time period, anyone who believed in Jesus Christ was termed a saint. Why? Because that person had, by accepting Jesus as the Messiah through faith, moved past his ordinary status (had been set apart) and had turned to (accepted) a new and special purpose in his life, that of being a Christian. Therefore, the root idea that we want to emphasize is "being set apart." There was no implication that the person had great virtues or was free from sin.

Obviously enough, sanctification has both a purpose and a goal. The idea is that the individual will move toward a higher spiritual plane, whether that happens right away or over time. Throughout this article we will use the terms "saint, sanctify" and "sanctification" in the New Testament sense of simply being set apart. When we want to touch upon the more modern sense of "saint" as in saying "Saint Bonaventure was a very holy man," we will use such terms as "reverent" and "virtuous" to qualify the change of meaning.

Most theologians would agree that justification comes either before sanctification, or at the same time. This brings us to our second working definition. Justification is a declaration that one is not guilty of sin, the implication being that one has in faith accepted God's grace (and does believe in the truth of Jesus being the divine Messiah), and by holding on to that grace, the person continues to be "not guilty" of his or her sins. It is a matter of God declaring someone not to be a sinner, even though he or she definitely is. God is the Supreme Judge, and He gets to make the decision of what our standing is.

Is it clear how these two ideas go together, but they are not the same thing? Perhaps a down-to-earth illustration will help to clarify matters. Suppose for a moment that you are on trial. The charge is murder, and you are stating your case to the jury. This is your story. Yes, you agree that you became very angry with the victim, one John Jones. In fact, you became so angry that you decided to kill him. You acquired a deadly weapon and drove to the house of John Jones. However, ten minutes before you got there, Mr. Jones died of a heart attack, never knowing that you were coming there to kill him. Therefore, you are telling the jury, you should be found not guilty. The prosecutor sees matters differently, and is seeking a conviction. Before the case goes to the jury, word reaches the court that the Governor has granted you a pardon for any and all crimes that you may have committed. The trial judge rules that there is no point in going ahead with the trial, and all

charges are dismissed. You are thrilled, and you call a number of your friends to meet with you and celebrate.

The scenario above relates to the concept of justification. You are certainly guilty of something -- you planned to commit a murder and you may not have had authority to be taking a deadly weapon to the victim's house. But, through no merit of your own, you have been pardoned and *declared* "not guilty" even though in a moral if not a legal sense you are extremely guilty. Thus a *right* status has been imputed to you, and you are in a sense *given title* to a status you have not earned. This is justification, and yes it does seem to call for a very, *very* generous Governor (note the capital G).

While you are partying with your friends over your happy and undeserved pardon, the thought occurs to you that there is something even better, hovering near your troubled world. What if you could somehow have a change in character, a cleansing of who you really are, so that you did not become violently angry with others, and would not be in danger of attacking some future John Jones? That would call for the imparting of a new you, a change within that would point you toward something better than you had ever been before. This mysterious longing that you begin to experience can be termed sanctification, sometimes called freedom from the tyranny of sin, and sometimes called a moral renovation of your current nature. It is a spiritual path toward God.

Just before we turn to a complete focus on sanctification, please consider our belief that both of the above-named doctrines are taught in the Book of Mormon. Also, beyond definitions and illustrations, it can be useful to place a symbol in one's mind -- an image that suggests and points to a more detailed concept. We want to suggest that a fitting symbol for sanctification is a white robe. The symbols that we are suggesting have the advantage of being in the Book of Mormon text, with the white robe appearing first in First Nephi 2:44 (LDS 1Ne 8:5), and becoming explicitly associated with righteousness in Second Nephi 3:56 (LDS 2 Ne 4:33). Please keep in mind that righteousness, which has ties to both of our terms defined above, is an older term that originally meant "right" or "right action" plus "wisdom" with reference to merciful and heaven-guided wisdom, not human wisdom. James 3:17 should be kept in mind: "But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy." We mean *that* kind of wisdom and *that* kind of white robe. For justification, we

suggest the symbol of a red ladder. We encounter this symbol in the Book of Mormon at Alma 29:25 (LDS Al 62:21), where the "ladders" and "strong cords" used by Moroni's forces can be thought of as a ladder representing Christ pulling someone upward to a higher status, and the strong cord as the Holy Spirit.

It is best to keep in mind that our family of words, "sanctification, sanctify" and "saint," have a large number of synonyms. The original meaning of "to make holy" was "to set apart," so words like "holiness" and "purify" are closely related to what we are examining. Several adjectives connect us to the concept of sanctification, including "holy, pure, chaste, spotless, blameless" and "cleansed."

J. Dwight Pentecost, in his book *Things Which Become Sound Doctrine*, joins with many other theologians in identifying three phases of sanctification. It is important for our study to consider that *initial* or *positional* sanctification is that point at the beginning when a believer, usually a new believer or one who has just found himself or herself, is set apart. Some may sense that this has happened, and others will grasp it in due time. But there is a lessening of one's ties to worldly things, and a sense that new goals are beckoning. A woman who has been converted to the Christian faith has had her position changed; she is starting down the path that will lead her to a more reverent and more virtuous appreciation of God's mercy and goodness. The process of giving up old (and often sinful) things in exchange for new and more spiritual things can take a long time. That second phase or aspect of sanctification (the road to being more like Christ) is called *experiential* or *progressive* sanctification. This is all about getting there, the struggle in this world to live a nobler life. In the end, to be fit to live in a place of heavenly glory, we need to let go of all our sins and set right anything that is still hanging in terms of how we have hurt others. That final phase is called *ultimate* or *perfective* or *telic* sanctification. Obviously enough, the Bible contains examples of all three aspects or understandings of sanctification, which in the interest of time and space we will not review. The question for us is this: does the Book of Mormon show evidence of understanding all three aspects?

In terms of *initial* sanctification or a sense of getting started, there is food for thought in that portion of King Benjamin's farewell address that is given by an angel. As was indicated in another Roundtable article, King Benjamin was basically preparing a Jewish New Year's

address when an angel came to the king and urged the inclusion of some new, highly Christological thoughts. The angel says that if a "natural man" (an unrepentant sinner) "...yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit ... and becomes a *saint* ... and becomes as a child ..." thus walking us through a true conversion. Surely such a newly converted person as the angel has in view would be a saint only in the *positional* sense. (The verse in question in Mosiah 1: 120, LDS Mosiah 3: 19.) A similar example can be seen in Alma 3: 95 (LDS Alma 5: 54) when Alma rhetorically asks his audience, "Will you persist in the persecution of your brothers, who humble themselves and walk after the holy order of God wherewith they have been brought into this church, having been *sanctified* by the Holy Spirit..." If the brothers or new converts in view have just become members, surely the sanctification mentioned here does not mean that the converts were reverent and virtuous saints the moment they walked in the door. In all likelihood, this is *positional* sanctification -- they were set apart for higher things by the Holy Spirit.

Then, as we look for *experiential* or *progressive* sanctification, we find passages such as Alma's statement to another audience, "...I have said these things to you, that I might awaken you to a sense of your duty to God, that you may walk *blameless* before Him ..." Remember that "blameless" is one of our adjectives that refers to sanctification. Regarding *progressive* sanctification, consider both "blameless" in Al 5:38 (LDS Al 7: 22) and "to cleanse from all unrighteousness" in v 25 (LDS Al 7:14). In this amazing sermon in Chapter Five of Alma (LDS Chapter Seven), all twelve of the fruits of the Spirit are mentioned. There would of course be reference to sanctification, as the *progressive* effort to become virtuous is a fruit of the Spirit. Next, near the beginning of Alma's Chapter Ten (LDS Chapter Thirteen), Alma speaks of holy men of old who were called to the high priesthood "... on account of their exceeding faith ... they were called after this holy order, and were *sanctified*, and their garments were washed white through the blood of the Lamb. Now they, after being *sanctified* by the Holy Spirit ... being *pure* and *spotless* before God, could not look upon sin except with abhorrence." (Al 10: 3-4, LDS Al 13: 11 - 12) Now here the focus is on men who had a morally high status, and were both experiencing a sanctified status and progressing toward sinlessness. Notice once again that the agent of this process is the Holy Spirit. Finally in Helaman 2:31 (LDS Hel 3:35) we have something of an instruction manual on how to move forward into a deeper state of sanctification. Mormon as editor says of the faithful believers, "They did fast and pray often, and did wax

stronger and stronger in their humility, and firmer and firmer in the faith of Christ ... even to the *purifying* and the *sanctification* of their hearts, which *sanctification* comes because of their yielding their hearts to God." It would be hard to find a more vibrant example of *experiential* sanctification.

Finally, we should anticipate that *ultimate* sanctification is more of a heavenly experience than an earthly one. Perhaps a very few people become so reverent and virtuous in this world that sin and anger and the like are no problem for them, but most of us are sinners. Forgiven, trying to do better, but still enmeshed in the foibles of this world. Accordingly, the Book of Mormon references to *ultimate* or *perfective* sanctification will most likely involve a looking forward to heaven, or a touching upon encounters beyond this world. To this point, consider the setting at Alma 5:42 (LDS Al 7:25). "May the Lord bless you and keep your garments *spotless*, that that you may at last be brought to sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob ... having your garments *spotless*, even as their garments are *spotless* in the kingdom of heaven, to go no more out." The implication of future holiness is fairly obvious. In a similar context, Mormon writes of the Holy Spirit's work, saying (in Moroni 8:29, LDS Moroni 8:25) that the Comforter fills "with hope and *perfect* love, which love endures by diligence in prayer, until the end will come, when all the *saints* will dwell with God." Surely these would be saints who have reached the goal of being like Christ in every way.

It appears that we have confirmed that the Book of Mormon knows all three aspects of sanctification. Perhaps a more practical question is now worth a little of our time: does the Book of Mormon give us advice on how to become more holy, more saintly, more cleansed from error? We maintain that it does, and that it recommends at least six things to move sanctification forward in each person's life. You may notice, as you read these six brief paragraphs, that the Holy Spirit is highly involved in traveling the pathway of sanctification.

First, the Book of Mormon urges those who would move forward in sanctification to "...yield to the enticings of the Holy Spirit..." as cited above. In this regard, compare Mormon's comment in Helaman of sanctification coming "...because of their yielding their hearts to God," also cited above. This corresponds to the spiritual fruit of being "easy to be entreated," but the broader concept is inviting the Holy Spirit to befriend, teach and guide. What hope do any of us have in the pursuit of a sanctified life that is

truly reverent and virtuous, if we do not seek and hold onto the friendship of the Holy Spirit? The Spirit's willingness to help is expressed in such passages as Second Nephi 14:6 (LDS 32:5) where it is said that the Holy Spirit "...will show you all things that you should do."

Second, sanctification is promoted by the fruit of the Spirit. As indicated in another Roundtable article, Alma's Fruit of the Spirit Sermon in Alma Chapter Five (LDS Chapter Seven) contains all twelve of the fruits, the dozpoma, personality traits that move us toward reverence and virtue. Alma again associates the Holy Spirit's leadership in one's life with the fruits in Alma 10:28 (LDS, 13:28) where Alma says "...be led by the Holy Spirit, becoming humble, meek, submissive, patient, full of live and longsuffering, having faithi ..." Paul tells the Roman saints that the fruits of the Spirit point to sanctification or holiness in Romans 6:22, where he tells the believers that having "...become servants to God, you have your *fruit* unto *holiness*, and the end (is) everlasting life."

Third, studying the scriptures, the word of God, moves us toward this same goal. In his Desire to Believe Sermon, Alma tells the Zoramites that God "...desires, in the first place, that you should believe, yes even on His word." (Alma 16:144, LDS 32:22) A few verses later he tells them that if they nourish the "word" in their hearts, they will "pluck the fruit thereof ... which is *pure* above all that is *pure*," (Alma 16: 171, LDS 32:42) another reference to sanctification.

Fourth, prayer is another means toward the same end. Amulek tells this audience (the Zoramites) "...humble yourselves and continue in prayer to Him ... and He has also said, the *righteous* will sit down in His kingdom ... their garments made *white* ..." a reference to sanctification, concluding with "...be watchful to pray continually ..." (selected verses from Alma 16: 219 - 238, LDS A1 34:19-38)

Fifth, although faith is a fruit of the Spirit, the Book of Mormon encourages a strong faith in Christ as an agent of sanctification or purification. Consider the words of Jesus to His Father in prayer: "Father, I thank You that You have *purified* these whom I have chosen, because of their *faith*." (Third Nephi 9:28, LDS 3N 19: 27,28)

Sixth, due to the Spirit's enlightenment and the divine energy He can give us, sanctification is aided by a human mind that seeks out spiritual things and creative new ideas.

Alma speaks of a believer who finds that the word and the Spirit "...begin to enlighten ..." and "...your understanding begins to be enlightened, and your mind begins to expand." (Alma 16:154, 161, LDS A1 32:28, 34)

Beyond the six approaches above, all aimed at improving our *progressive* sanctification, there may be others. The only additional aid that we will consider for a moment is meditation. While the word "meditation" does not occur in the Book of Mormon, there is the fascinating phrase in Jarom 1:9 (LDS, Jarom 1:4) that those who have faith also "have communion with the Holy Spirit." While these words have some affinity with Paul's closing words of blessing in 2 Cor 13:14, Jarom's term "communion" is very likely based on the Hebrew term *siach*, found in Psalm 77:6, with the meaning of "commune, meditate, talk softly but meaningfully." The King James phrase in Psalm 77:6, "I commune with mine own heart," is rendered "meditate" in several translations. Certainly the exercise of faith, and having "communion with the Holy Spirit," are suggestive of meditation.

SANCTIFICATION AND THEOSIS

We are so close to a related topic that we need to explore one more concept. Theosis or divinization is a teaching that is embraced by the Greek Orthodox Church. It is much less commonly met in the West. Theosis, a term coined by Gregory of Nazianzus, means a taking on of Godly qualities. This is suggested in Paul's comment that Jesus took upon Himself sin "...that we might become the righteousness of God." (2Cor 5: 21) Theosis usually stops about six inches short of the transformed believer literally becoming a god, but it definitely means a very close and lasting relationship with God. This teaching resonates well with the comment in Second Peter that through God's promises "...you might become partakers of the divine nature." (2Ptr 1:4) Since theosis is popular in the East but less respected in the West, where does the Book of Mormon come down on the issue?

For the most part, the Book of Mormon concerns itself with a rather basic formula of faith, repentance, baptism and being set apart to pursue the goal of becoming spotless. There is frankly very little in the entire text that would suggest mere mortals can be transformed to a divine nature in this world. Therefore, the Book of Mormon seems to know nothing of theosis -- nothing, that is, until we come to the three immortal Nephites. Then, amazingly and impressively, the language of theosis is suddenly at home in the Book of Mormon.

Most of our readers know the account, found in Third Nephi, of the twelve disciples of Jesus, three of whom secretly wish to stay on the earth as ministers until the return of Christ. Mormon as editor goes on at some length, discussing the physical situation of the three who are "to tarry." (3N 13:24, LDS 28:12) Our task is to connect Book of Mormon terminology with the terminology of theosis.

Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov, in their book *Theosis*, state that a "...variety of terms are used to communicate the idea of (theosis)," beginning with *apatheia*, the exemption from human emotion and pain. Compare that with the status of the three who "...were sanctified in the flesh, that they were holy, and that the powers of the earth could not hold them." (3N13: 52, LDS 28:39) *Apatheia* is paralleled in Third Nephi 13:20 (LDS 28:9).

In a similar vein, *aftharsia* is a term from theosis meaning an exemption from physical corruption or death. Compare 3N 13:; 18,19 (LDS 28:7,8).

Transfiguration is often a theme of theosis (compare 3N 13:27, LDS 28:15), as is the idea of *metochos*, partaking of the divine nature (compare 3N 13:22, LDS 28:10, and consider Hebrews 6:4). *Metochos* reminds us of *koinonia*, or communion with the divine, which we have already considered in terms of Jarom 1:9 (LDS 1:4) and Psalm 77:6.

Thus, while most of the Book of Mormon is not concerned with theosis, its ideas and language have a striking compatibility with what is said of the three disciples who tarry. Sanctification and theosis are not the same thing, but it appears they may cross paths in the future of spiritual matters.

INSIGHTS

Perhaps we can see that there is a certain overlapping of meanings and emphases. Returning to the symbol of the white robe, we should not lose sight of the fact that the color white is used repeatedly in the Book of Mormon as a symbol of *purity* or that which is *sanctified*. We should also see a distinct meaning in Third Nephi 5:10 (LDS, 11:8) wherein Jesus descends to earth "clothed in a white robe." In a rather mystical passage, Jesus gazes upon His praying disciples, and "they were as white as (His) countenance and garments ... And behold the whiteness thereof did exceed all whiteness ... there could be nothing

on earth so *white* as the *whiteness* (of the disciples and their garments)." (3N 9: 25,26, LDS 3N19:25) Here symbol and meaning are so tightly blended as to merge into the same thing. It might help to note in passing that the color white is a Tibetan symbol for enlightenment.

In conclusion, it would seem that we have found some Book of Mormon phrases and ideas that are distinctive enough to be called new insights or fresh perspectives. The first of three that we should mention is from the angel's speech, quoted by King Benjamin in early Mosiah. Here, right after referencing salvation, blood and justification, the angel urges everyone to yield "to the enticings of the Holy Spirit." (Mos 1:120, LDS 3:19) What seems to be in view is prevenient grace: the Spirit has gone ahead of us, and is now *enticing* us to enter the path toward *perfective* sanctification. This differs from the notion that one must convert and observe certain behaviors before the Holy Spirit grants any blessing. We might go so far as to say that the Book of Mormon portrays an activist Holy Spirit who seeks our friendship and beckons us upward, whether we are full of decency or full of sin.

The second of three noteworthy passages is Mormon's crisply drawn portrait of the faithful church amid a sea of discord. In this passage (Hel 2:31, LDS 3:35), we are told "sanctification comes because of their yielding their hearts to God." It sounds basic but we cannot find this wording in the Bible. The words seem to suggest a grace of sanctification that is offered, anticipating a response of the heart and the emotions.

The third insightful passage is Moroni 8:29 (LDS 8:25) where there is an ambient theme of the generous mercy of Christ. In this key verse, the basics of repentance and baptism are mentioned, with parallels to the Helaman passage in pointing to faith, humility and prayer. But here we have the visitation of the Holy Spirit, perhaps the personal communion that Jarom emphasized. Then Mormon switches names, from the Holy Spirit to the "Comforter," the Strengthener, the loving Friend who is tougher than one's adversaries. We almost have a new name here -- "the Comforter who fills with hope and perfect love." With the comment that diligent prayer sustains hope and love, Mormon changes the scene to "the end," when "all the *saints* will dwell with God." Somehow there is a message here -- an enticing invitation -- that whispers "Come; as an artist paints a picture of beauty, let us remold ourselves into the fellowship of sainthood." Humility and the Holy Spirit are the midpoint of this lengthy verse. It is not so much unique as it is

insightful amid its gentle compassion.

Hopefully, this article serves to help us understand that the doctrine of sanctification, one of the richest concepts of Christianity, is taught throughout the Book of Mormon. It is taught accurately, with reference to *positional* sanctification, *progressive* sanctification and *ultimate* sanctification. It is taught elegantly, with insights of prayer, faith, spiritual fruit, closeness of the Spirit, and with the touching ideas that the Holy Spirit entices us toward sanctification, even as God's sanctified ones are praying for us with love and power. It is a joy to read this book, and share its light with a modern world that is too dark and too violent. May our image of the beckoning white robe help you to seek a fuller understanding of sanctification in your life, is our prayer.