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by faith

The
Theology
of **Sonship**

Neil H. Williams



The Theology of Sonship

Dr. Neil H. Williams

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World Harvest Mission
101 West Ave Ste 305
Jenkintown PA 19046-2039
whm.org



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Introduction

The material in this booklet is taken from a lecture given at a conference on the subject of sanctification in the spring of 2001.¹ The lecture presented the theology behind Sonship, a discipleship course first developed and distributed by World Harvest Mission for its own staff in the mid-1980's. Today the course is used by a growing number of Christians in the United States and abroad, and is especially popular in Reformed circles.

The Theology of Sonship explores the central thrust of the *Sonship* course, which is sanctification by faith. In order to do this, we will address the following three areas:

- 1** The theological foundation of *Sonship* and establishing this foundation in the biblical material.
- 2** How *Sonship* uses this theological foundation of sanctification by faith.
- 3** Briefly interacting with two critiques of *Sonship*.

¹ *The Theology of Sonship* was originally presented by Dr. Neil H. Williams on March 8, 2001, at Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in South Carolina.

1 The Theological Foundation of *Sonship* and Its Biblical Basis

First, what is the theological foundation of *Sonship*?²² What unifies the course, and what is the biblical basis for the material? The theological foundation for *Sonship* may be summarized by the phrase “sanctification by faith.” The phrase may sound strange to some. We all affirm “justification by faith”; however, is it equally valid that we are also sanctified by faith? What is sanctification by faith? Is it biblical? Does it even need to be defended?

From the time of the Reformation, we affirm that salvation is by Christ alone, by grace alone, and by faith alone. Applying this to sanctification, we should say that sanctification is also by faith. One can find affirmations of this position in statements by various evangelical writers—Lutheran,³ Wesleyan,⁴ Keswick,⁵ Pentecostal,⁶ and Reformed.

A. A. Hoekema argues that just as we speak

about justification by faith, so also we must speak of sanctification by faith. He writes: “The Bible also teaches that we are sanctified by faith. One of the central truths proclaimed in the Protestant Reformation is that we are justified by faith. It is equally true, however, that we are sanctified by faith.”⁷ Likewise, Sinclair Ferguson, who argues that union with Christ is central and foundational to sanctification, asks the question as to how Christ’s sanctification and our need for it are brought together. The answer is by the Spirit and by faith.⁸ Berkouwer’s work *Faith and Sanctification* extensively establishes faith as the instrument or means of sanctification. He concludes his work with this statement: “In the bond between faith and sanctification we perceive, no less than in the bond between faith and justification, the pulse-beat of the Gospel. If faith will but lift its blossoms to catch the sunlight of God’s grace, the fruit will be a life imbued with holiness.”⁹

Now, although we find the affirmation of this doctrine from various positions, there are sometimes significant departures from this view, or troubling inconsistencies, especially when it comes to the practical application of sanctification by faith. As we will see, it is important to defend this as a biblical doctrine, something I wish to do by considering seven areas.

2 All references to the *Sonship* manual are to the 1999 edition.

3 Elmer L. Towns, “Martin Luther on Sanctification,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 126, no. 502 (Apr 1969): 117.

4 Lawrence W. Wood, “The Wesleyan View,” in *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, ed. Donald L. Alexander (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 96; Melvin E. Dieter, “The Wesleyan Perspective,” in *Five Views on Sanctification* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1987), 16–17, 27.

5 J. Robertson McQuilkin, “The Keswick Perspective,” in *Five Views on Sanctification* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1987), 165–71.

6 Stanley M. Horton, “The Pentecostal Perspective,” in *Five Views on Sanctification* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1987), 112.

7 Anthony A. Hoekema, “The Reformed Perspective,” in *Five Views on Sanctification* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1987), 65.

8 Sinclair B. Ferguson, “The Reformed View,” in *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, ed. Donald L. Alexander (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 51.

9 G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification*, trans. John Friend (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1952), 193.

1: Our union with Christ

Sanctification by faith can be demonstrated by our union with Christ. The Christian life is “life in Christ,” that is, union and communion with the Lord Jesus. Paul writes in Ephesians 1:3 that we have all spiritual blessings in Christ. Every blessing we have, we receive by being united to him. Because we are united to Christ, we receive everything from him—his perfection, perseverance, justification, sanctification, adoption, resurrection, and obedience.

A consequence of our union with Christ is that everything that Christ has becomes ours. Being in Christ we have every blessing (Eph 1:3), such as hope (1 Cor 15:19), redemption (Rom 3:24), freedom (Gal 2:4), heavenly reward (Phil 3:14), holiness (1 Cor 1:30), forgiveness (Eph 4:32), and joy (Phil 1:26). Every blessing of the gospel comes through our union with Jesus—our adoption, justification, sanctification, perseverance, and glorification. In Christ, we become sons and daughters (Gal 3:26) and God becomes our Father.

But the question remains: how do we personally appropriate the aforementioned blessings? How do those things belonging to Christ become our own? The answer, going back to Calvin, is that it is accomplished through the Spirit and by faith.¹⁰ We are grafted into Christ by faith and we continue to receive the blessings of that union by faith. The Spirit brings to us everything that belongs to Christ through the instrument of faith. This Spirit/faith dynamic helps us answer such related questions as: How are we justified? (By faith in Christ through the Spirit who justifies (1 Cor 6:11)). How are we adopted? (By faith in Christ through the Spirit of Sonship (Rom 8:15)). How do we persevere? (By faith in Christ through the work and power of the Spirit (Phil 1:19; Heb 12:1–2)). How are we sanctified? (By faith in

Christ through the sanctifying Spirit (1 Cor 6:11; 2 Thess 2:13; Titus 3:5; 1 Pet 1:2)).

So we are justified by faith, we are adopted by faith, we persevere by faith—and we are sanctified by faith. Having said this, we need to address one misconception about the phrase “sanctification by faith.” When we speak about sanctification by faith, we are not equating sanctification with justification or any other blessing. By grounding sanctification in our union with Christ, we are not saying that justification and sanctification are the same thing. What we are saying is that they come through the same means. Christ is our justification and sanctification, and we receive Christ and his blessings, including justification and sanctification, through the Spirit and by faith. John Owen writes:

The only way of receiving supplies of spiritual strength and grace from Jesus Christ, on our part, is by faith. Hereby we come unto him, are implanted in him, abide with him, so as to bring forth fruit. He dwells in our hearts by faith, and he acts in us by faith, and we live by faith in or on the Son of God. This, I suppose, will be granted, that if we receive any thing from Christ, it must be by faith, it must be in the exercise of it, or in a way of believing; nor is there any one word in the Scripture that gives the least encouragement to expect either grace or mercy from him in any other way, or by any other means.¹¹

2: Particular biblical passages

Sanctification by faith can be demonstrated from a multitude of Scripture passages—both descriptive and prescriptive. We surely agree that Christians are called to grow in holiness; the question, however, is how this occurs, and by what means. Is sanctification the result of what we may call “Nike Christianity” (Just do it!)? The Lord has commanded you to love your

¹⁰ John Calvin, *The Library of Christian Classics*, Vol XX, ed. John T. McNeill, vol. one, Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion, trans. Ford L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 537.

¹¹ John Owen, *The Glory of Christ*, ed. William H. Goold, *The Works of John Owen*, vol. one (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), 459.

enemies. Now go and obey! Or is it “Club-Med Christianity” (let go and let God)? Sit back, enjoy the ride, and let the Spirit blast you from regeneration to glorification.

Consider the story of Jonah. How is disobedient Jonah, fleeing to Tarshish, going to grow in obedience? Jonah is regenerate, has the Spirit, is a leader in the covenant community, and has a solid theology of grace (Jon 4:2). He knows the law and what God has called him to do, but how can he actually change? Jonah chapter 2 describes his transformation, and as we will see, this transformation is effected by faith. Inside the great fish, Jonah acquires no new information; rather he returns to the gospel and repents. He focuses on the temple (2:4, 6)—the “type and shadow” of the gospel which is to come. Chapter 2 has the language of the Psalms. Jonah had the Word stored in his heart, but now he believes it. The result? He repents and renounces idols (2:8). Now when God speaks to him again, Jonah obeys (Jon 3:1–3). We may say, following the pattern of Hebrews 11, that by faith Jonah obeyed the Lord and went to Nineveh.¹²

We often need much convincing about the “mechanism of obedience.” The writer of Hebrews spends the entire eleventh chapter outlining the means by which the saints obeyed God. Their obedience came by faith: they trusted God and believed his Word and promises, and that faith expressed itself in obedience. So the Christian life is not solely a commandment-oriented way of life, where people are just told what to do, and then do it. If Hebrews 11 does not describe “Nike Christianity,” neither does it describe people who have “let go and let God.” The life of faith is a life of effort, but it is a certain type of effort. We must therefore distinguish between two types of effort, believing and unbelieving.

12 Of course, Jonah has not arrived spiritually. At the end of the book, God again disrupts Jonah’s circumstances, and questions Jonah to expose his self-righteous, angry, and hard heart. Thus, the ongoing need for repentance and faith is again demonstrated.

Perhaps when some people use the phrase “sanctification by faith,” they mean a life of no effort.¹³ This, however, is not our position. In a life of faith, effort is required, but the kind of effort we exert can be either unbelieving or believing. I intend to distinguish between the two types.

The Christian life is described as a race. Obviously, to run this race is going to take effort. But, as Paul warns, we only win the crown if we compete according to the rules (2 Tim 2:5). One chief rule is that this race must be run by faith. To run apart from faith is to run backwards or not at all.

Some people, on hearing the word “faith,” hear “good feelings.” Others hear, “Let go and let God.” Others hear “mere intellectual knowledge.” The faith of Hebrews 11 allows for none of these options, but describes a living and active trust in Christ, a heart-reliance on God. It is important to emphasize this working out of faith, for some may assume that “sanctification by faith” betrays a pietist or quietist incursion into the Christian life. Faith, however, has an active side that works itself out in love (Gal 5:6)—including social action (Jas 2:14–18). In fact, without this outworking or expression, there is no genuine faith.

Regarding this “expressive faith,” Hoekema notes: “[F]aith is not only a receptive organ but also an operative power. True faith by its very nature produces spiritual fruit.”¹⁴ This fact is demonstrated especially in Hebrews 11. It is also the force of James’ argument: genuine faith will result in good deeds (Jas 2:14–26). Similarly, Paul begins and ends the book of Romans with the phrase, “the obedience of faith” (Rom 1:5; 16:26). Although the interpretation of this phrase is debated, I believe the NIV cor-

13 See, for example, Warfield’s critique of the “Higher Life” movement. Benjamin B. Warfield, *Perfectionism*, Vol VIII, Part Two, in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1991), 512.

14 Hoekema, “The Reformed Perspective,” 65.

rectly renders it as “the obedience that comes from faith.” This interpretation is confirmed by Paul’s statements elsewhere that Christ lives in our hearts by faith (Eph 3:17), that the life we live in the body we live by faith (Gal 2:20), that faith expresses itself in love (Gal 5:6), that our work is produced by faith (1 Thess 1:3), that every act is prompted by faith (2 Thess 1:11), and that God chose us to be saved through belief in the truth (2 Thess 2:13). For Paul, the Christian life is lived the same way it was begun—by faith. He says in Colossians 2:6: “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him.”

Ridderbos has this to say on the connection between faith and the entire Christian life: “One can conclude nothing other than that faith is the way in which, having died and risen with Christ, life through the Spirit, putting on the new man, being renewed after the image of Christ, regeneration, in short, the new creation of God, is realized and individualized.”¹⁵ So it is by faith that we live. It is by faith that we please God (Heb 11:6). It is by faith that we stand. It is by faith that we walk. It is by faith that the devil is successfully resisted (Eph 6:16). Faith is the victory that overcomes the world (1 John 5:4). The one who overcomes the world, the flesh, and the devil is the one who believes in Christ.

3: Sanctification by repentance

Repentance is the twin sister of faith. A life of faith is inconceivable apart from a life of repentance, for turning to Christ always involves turning away from sin. It is impossible to receive the truth of the gospel into our lives apart from also giving up our unbelief by repentance. Thus, we find in the Gospels that both faith and repentance are the commanded responses to the preaching of the Good News (Matt 3:1–12; John 3:16). Now if repentance and faith are so closely related, we can also

demonstrate sanctification by faith, by showing sanctification by repentance. Do we find a similar relationship in Scripture in regards to repentance?

Consider a few examples. In Proverbs, we read that the person who confesses and renounces his sins finds mercy (Prov 28:13). Similarly, Isaiah tells us that God dwells with the humble (Isa 57:15). He comes to those who repent of their sins (Isa 59:20), and in repentance is our salvation (Isa 30:15).

In the New Testament, John the Baptist urges his hearers to produce fruit that is in keeping with repentance (Matt 3:8). And Paul describes his preaching to Agrippa in this manner: “I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds” (Acts 26:20). We can also see this dynamic at work in 2 Corinthians 7, where Paul describes what godly sorrow had produced in the members of the Church there: “See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done” (2 Cor 7:11). We may say that repentance is a means of grace, for James says that God gives grace to the humble (Jas 4:6). God lifts up the humble (Jas 4:10). He is with the broken and contrite. As we repent, God forgives and purifies us. John writes these well-known words: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Like faith, repentance is the instrument God uses to make us more like Christ. God is the one who dwells with the contrite. He is the one who gives grace to the humble. God saves the humble. He lifts the humble. He opposes the proud—be it parent, pastor, husband, or wife. To the repentant and humble, God pours out his love, forgiveness, mercy, and salvation. This being so, we can see how central repentance is to the transformation of our lives, for repen-

¹⁵ Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of his Theology*, trans. John R. de Witt (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1975), 233.

tance is central to our on-going communion with Christ. Thus, Calvin rightly spoke about the Christian life as a race of repentance.¹⁶ In other words, repentance should be a lifestyle. Finally, we are reminded by Luther in the first of his 95 theses, “When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said, ‘repent,’ he meant that the entire life of believers should be one of repentance.”

4: Disobedience by unbelief

We can demonstrate sanctification by faith by its negative counterpart, disobedience by unbelief. Beginning in the Garden of Eden, we can infer that Eve took the fruit of the tree not as a spontaneous act. The act proceeded from unbelief. What was that unbelief? It was when she believed Satan, rather than God. It was when she trusted in her own reasoning ability to discern good and evil. It was when Eve exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped created things. This unbelief expressed itself in outward disobedience by eating of the tree. We can give other examples. Abraham had a child through Hagar because at that point Abraham and Sarah had given up believing in God’s promise, and so endeavored to realize the promise, not from faith, but from unbelief (Gen 16; Gal 4:21–31). Here is an example of unbelieving effort. On another occasion, Abraham lied about his wife to Abimelech (Gen 20), because he was fearing other people rather than God. Fear of people is another perspective on unbelief, and expresses itself in outward disobedience. As a New Testament example consider Ananias and Sapphira who came and gave money to the apostles (Acts 5:1–11). Their outward disobedience came from inward unbelief, specifically a form of self-righteousness where they endeavored to look more generous than they actually were.

James asks, “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires

that battle within you?” (Jas 4:1) Instead of desiring Christ, we desire other things, which is nothing less than unbelief. What causes this “Jurassic Church” phenomenon, this biting and devouring? Fights and quarrels that occur in the church come from unbelief, from ungodly ruling desires.

The church in the wilderness all died in the desert because they did not combine the word they heard with faith (Heb 4:2). Israel was broken off because of unbelief (Rom 11:20). In the end, we conclude with Paul that whatever is not of faith is sin (Rom 14:23). Nothing that comes from unbelief is a good work. Anything that comes from serving, fearing, trusting, or worshipping other things apart from Christ is sin. It is sin even if it looks good on the outside. So, for example, the church at Sardis had achieved for itself a fine reputation (Rev 3:1). It looked good on the outside, but Christ called their deeds incomplete and dead. The remedy for this church was to return to a renewed faith, repentance, and a genuine obedience.

5: Faith and the Spirit

What is clear from the New Testament is that the Spirit sanctifies us (1 Cor 6:11), produces fruit in our lives (Gal 5:22–23), and causes us to grow in love and holiness. Therefore, to demonstrate sanctification by faith, we need to establish the connection between faith and the Spirit’s work. Some have noted this relationship. Berkouwer writes, “The work of the Holy Spirit in man must always be tied in with the orientation of man’s faith to divine grace—an orientation which is effected by the Holy Spirit.”¹⁷ Unfortunately, in some discussions on sanctification, not only is the central place of the Spirit and faith marginalized, but also the connection between the two is often unclear. Drawing on our previous discussion, we have noted that the blessings of our union with Christ come to us by the Spirit and through faith. We have seen that Christ dwells in our

¹⁶ Calvin, Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 601–02.

¹⁷ Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification*, 83, see also 111.

hearts by faith. But who is it that dwells in our hearts, except the Spirit of Christ? This powerful Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, who lives in our hearts by faith. There is a clear connection between faith and the Spirit's work. Some of Paul's questions to the Galatians revolve around this concern: How did you receive the Spirit, and why does God give his Spirit? (Gal 3:2, 5) The answer is faith. The great power of the Spirit, who raised Jesus from the dead, is at work in those who believe (Eph 1:18). We receive the promise of the Spirit by faith (Gal 3:14) and having believed we are given the seal of the Holy Spirit (Eph 1:13). Consider Paul's benediction in Romans 15:13. Here the apostle connects fruit in our lives with faith and the Spirit's work: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." So Ridderbos writes:

The Spirit does not work as an anonymous, incalculable, miraculous power, but as the Spirit of Christ. The relationship in which the church stands to the Spirit and the manner in which it actually has a share in the Spirit is therefore determined by its relationship to Christ, that is, by faith in him...The manner in which the power of Christ's death and resurrection is effected in the life of his own can thus be said to be that of the Spirit as well as that of faith.¹⁸

We may therefore conclude that to live by faith is to live by the Spirit. Sanctification by faith is about the Spirit's power transforming our hearts and behavior.

6: A faith relationship

When we speak about sanctification by faith, we are speaking, in essence, about sanctification by and through a covenantal relationship, an ongoing, daily relationship with Christ. Sanctification is not mere moral improvement. It is not "behavior modification" divorced from a relationship. It is not doing things that look

good on the outside, divorced from an ongoing relationship with a Person. Whatever is not of faith is sin, because genuine obedience is always connected to communion with Christ. To speak of holiness apart from this communion is to describe a dead moralism.

This lack of a faith-relationship is especially observed in many Pharisees. Endemic to much Pharisaism was its radical splitting of the law from a faith-relationship with God, which resulted in an empty, moralistic shell. By undermining the means or instrument by which they could grow in holiness, many Pharisees were left with a form of godliness without the power. Thus, Pharisees were not only legalists but also the greatest of antinomians, for they had cut themselves off from the power to live and obey.¹⁹ Because many Pharisees had divorced faith from sanctification,²⁰ they completely undermined the means of grace. Their prayers and fasting were outward observances that became instruments for the attainment of righteousness before God, others, and themselves.

Sanctification by faith, rather than bypassing or downplaying the "means of grace," establishes them as "means." Living by faith is not mystical, whereby the Scriptures, sacraments, prayer, or fellowship are minimized or removed. Conversely, to stress these means apart from faith is to undermine these means. Calvin asks, "But what is a sacrament received apart from faith but the most certain ruin of the church?"²¹

19 Similarly, licentiousness divorces grace from faith, and concludes that because God loves me, I can do what I want. However, this is not a life of faith, for to believe in the love of God compels us to love others (2 Cor 5:14). Both legalism and license err in thoroughly disengaging faith from law and grace.

20 "[P]harisaism embodies a degenerate sanctification which arises from breaking the bond between faith and sanctification." Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification*, 120.

21 John Calvin, *The Library of Christian Classics*, Vol xx, ed. John T. McNeill, vol. two, Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1289.

18 Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, 231.

By stressing this relational orientation, we also stress that living by faith is not a call to perfect motivation. When some hear “living by faith,” they think this means obeying God with perfectly pure motives. Faith, however, is to be distinguished from, and is much broader than, motivation. The people of Hebrews 11 did not have perfect motives, yet their work was accepted because it was done by faith. Likewise, an unbeliever, through so-called “good motives,” may help the elderly or poor, yet the work is ultimately unacceptable to God for there is no faith.

7: Examples from the tradition²²

Let me draw your attention to two books where sanctification by faith is persuasively argued. One is *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, ascribed to Edward Fisher. The other is Walter Marshall’s *Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*.

In the preface to the *Marrow*, we find these words: “The gospel method of sanctification, as well as of justification, lies so far out of the ken of natural reason, that if all the rationalists in the world, philosophers and divines, had consulted together to lay down a plan,

for repairing the lost image of God in man, they had never hit upon that which the divine wisdom has pitched upon, viz., That sinners should be sanctified in Christ Jesus, 1 Cor. i.2, by faith in him, Acts xxvi. 18. Nay, being laid before them, they would have rejected it with disdain, as foolishness, 1 Cor. i. 23.”²³

For the *Marrow*, the degree or measure of obedience is always in accordance to faith.²⁴ Faith is the only means by which we may attain holiness and good works.²⁵ One class of people the *Marrow* responds to is the legalist or a person called nomista—the legalist who has separated works from Christ, or deeds from faith, or has placed “holiness” before faith. How does the *Marrow* answer this legalist? It does so by stressing sanctification by faith.²⁶

Walter Marshall’s *Gospel Mystery of Sanctification* is remarkable for its encompassing view of faith. Marshall relates faith to virtually every topic he considers. If there is one great mystery for Marshall, it is this: sanctification is by faith. For him, faith is the “means and instrument whereby we receive Christ, and all his fullness, actually into our hearts. This excellent use and office of faith is encountered by a multitude of errors. Men naturally esteem, that it is too small and slight a thing to produce so great effects...Some will allow, that faith is the sole condition of our justification, and the instrument to receive it...but they account that it is not sufficient or effectual to sanctification, but that it rather tendeth to licentiousness, if it be not joined with some other means, that

22 As a modern example, consider Francis Schaeffer’s work in *True Spirituality*. He writes: “In justification the instrument by which we receive the free gift of God is faith, which believes God as He has given us His promises in the Bible. In sanctification the instrument by which we receive the free gift of God is faith, which believes God as He has given us His promises in the Bible. It is exactly the same thing... Let me repeat: the only difference in the practice is that in justification it is once for all, and the Christian life is lived moment by moment. The Christian life is acting moment by moment on the same principle, and in the same way, as I acted at the moment of my justification.” Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer*, vol. 3: *A Christian View of Spirituality* (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books 1982), 280.

Likewise, Hodge writes: “The faith by which a believer lives, is not specifically different in its nature or object from the faith required of every man in order to his salvation. The life of faith is only the continued repetition, it may be with ever increasing strength and clearness, of those exercises by which we first receive Christ, in all his fullness and in all his offices, as our God and Saviour.” Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol III (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans), 102.

23 Thomas Boston, *The Complete Works of Thomas Boston in Twelve Volumes*, ed. Samuel M’Millan, vol. VII (London: William Tegg, 1853), 147.

24 John Colquhoun, who was regarded as one of the ablest defenders of *Marrow* theology, concurs. He writes: “The more a believer makes progress in the habit and exercise of faith and repentance, the more does he advance in salvation from the power and practice of all sin.” John Colquhoun, *Repentance* (London: Banner of Truth, 1965), 139.

25 Boston, *Works of Thomas Boston*, 325.

26 For example, Boston, *Works of Thomas Boston*, 337–43.

may be powerful and effectual to secure an holy practice.”²⁷

2 *Sonship's Use of Sanctification by Faith*

What is Sonship all about? What are the central concerns of the course? How does it use sanctification by faith to address these central concerns?

Because sanctification by faith is the paradigm for the *Sonship* material, there is much discussion in the course on areas we have already considered in section one, such as: repentance, humility, the Spirit's work in our lives, living out of our union with Christ, and a stress on a relationship with our heavenly Father. But how does *Sonship* specifically and practically use the doctrine of sanctification by faith?

In a nutshell, the *Sonship* program takes sanctification by faith and applies it to two areas, namely justification and adoption. The course takes these doctrines into the arena of everyday life, asking questions such as: How would my life and actions be different if I believed in a greater way that I am a child of God, that I am righteous, beloved, accepted, and forgiven? What are the practical implications of my justification and adoption?

What many may find surprising is that foundational to the program is neither “sonship” nor “adoption.” Fundamentally, *Sonship* is not about sonship! It is not as though *Sonship* has taken the often-neglected doctrine of adoption and emphasized it. Neither is its focus essentially on justification. Rather, the course is about the implications of believing that we are justified and adopted.²⁸

²⁷ Walter Marshall, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformation Heritage Books, 1999), 43–44.

²⁸ Certain criticisms of *Sonship* have misunderstood the course at this foundational point. (This misunderstanding is partly because *Sonship* is not a theological

Furthermore, *Sonship* should not be characterized as a course that emphasizes “grace” in contrast to “law.” Let us consider Jonah once again. Jonah provides us with one of the most eloquent and beautiful descriptions of God in the Bible (Jon 4:2). But when we look more closely, we see that on every point of Jonah's description of God, he himself proves to be the opposite. God is gracious and compassionate; Jonah is hard and unforgiving. God is slow to anger; Jonah is fuming under the vine. God is abounding in love; Jonah is living in contempt. God relents from sending calamity upon Nineveh; Jonah desires its destruction.

This radical split between knowing wonderful truths and living them out may be called the “Jonah syndrome.” When suffering from this disorder, we can clearly state the truths of

treatise and sometimes uses imprecise language.) *Sonship* speaks of adoption and justification in the context of sanctification, but this does not mean that *Sonship* as a whole has located the source of sanctification in justification (see Jay E. Adams, *Biblical Sonship: An Evaluation of the Sonship Discipleship Course* (Woodruff, SC: Timeless Texts, 1999), 34), or that *Sonship* has confused justification with adoption (see Chad B. Van Dixhoorn, “The *Sonship* Program for Revival: A Summary and Critique,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 61, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 233). The focus and intent of the course is rather on believing that we are justified and adopted at the level where, to borrow words from Paul, “we live and move and have our being.”

In a related issue, Van Dixhoorn sees the promotional material of *Sonship* as approaching an anti-intellectual extreme since it states that the course is not about imparting new information, but changing lives (Van Dixhoorn, “The *Sonship* Program,” 230). He then, however, goes on to say that the “course is primarily a course that imparts doctrinal information so that lives will be changed” (Van Dixhoorn, “The *Sonship* Program,” 230 n13). In both cases, this is incorrect. (1) The stress on not imparting new information is not anti-intellectual, but rather a concern to emphasize believing what we already know. (2) Does providing doctrinal information automatically produce changed lives? Orthodoxy is the foundation for correct Christian living; however, *Sonship* does not assume an unbreakable connection between orthodoxy and orthopraxy. As seen in the story of Jonah, we can speak about God's grace and be ungracious. So, for example, our theology of God's forgiveness and his love for us needs to be believed, and from that basis, we need to forgive and love others.

the gospel, but these truths have not affected and transformed our lives in particular areas. Jonah was a great preacher of grace. All his words were correct and even beautiful, yet he hardly believed them, for they did not affect his life—at least in regard to the Ninevites. Jonah does not need more information or doctrinal instruction about the gospel, for he already has a profound “theology of grace.” His essential problem is not that he needs more information to change his life.

Like Jonah, we can have a grace-centered, evangelical, Reformed theology, yet still be self-righteous and legalistic. We can affirm the grace of God, yet be ungracious. To address the Jonah syndrome, *Sonship* seeks to unpack the implications of our justification and adoption. I shall attempt to provide some examples of this out-working in daily life in the following two sections.

The implications of justification

How many arguments at home, church, or work revolve around who is right or who is at fault? When my wife asks, “Neil, why are you giving me that disapproving look?” my immediate response is, “No, I’m not!” But why am I so quick to defend myself, and can the gospel address this defensiveness? If I arrive late for work, and someone jokingly says, “You’re late!” why do I still have to give an explanation so I do not appear lazy or irresponsible?

We can easily dismiss these kinds of interactions as insignificant, but they are revealing. We may not be robbing banks, but we all gossip, complain, criticize, make excuses, defend ourselves, and boast. These are all righteousness issues. These sins revolve around being right and looking good. They come from the ruling desire to be righteous, or more exactly, to be self-righteous. In such a context, believing our justification has specific daily application to our lives. By virtue of our union with Christ, we are declared righteous. We do not have to gossip to show how right we are (compared

with how wrong someone else is). We do not have to make excuses or run over someone to make ourselves look good and to be right. To live by faith is to live out of our identity in Christ—that we are righteous and forgiven. We are forgiven ten thousand talents, so why do we choke people who owe us crippling debts? Is it not because we have forgotten about the mercy of the great King towards us? (Matt 18:21–35) Believing that I am righteous and forgiven gives me the room to admit to my wife that I am wrong. This active trust provides the basis and power not to seek my own righteousness by defending myself and attacking her. God’s mercy for me gives me the basis for forgiving those who harm me. Believing that I am justified allows me to open up and admit what I am really like and what I struggle with.²⁹

It is interesting that *Sonship* has been especially effectual in a Reformed context, where the perennial temptation is to rely on the correctness or rightness of one’s theology. The temptation is to use this theology to establish one’s own righteousness before God and others. In such cases, Reformed theology then becomes a means to condemn or distance oneself from others, to build a record, to feel good about oneself, and to derive life from being “correct.”

Since the fruit of self-righteousness often looks good on the outside, *Sonship* is also concerned about this question: “What is the nature of true obedience?” What kind of fruit are we looking for? Is it merely outwardly observable “obedience”? Just because I look good, does it mean that I am obedient?

Say, for example, after an argument with your wife, you bite your tongue, deny your resentment, and give her flowers. It looks

²⁹ Van Dixhoorn argues that *Sonship* has neglected the positive side of justification (Van Dixhoorn, “The *Sonship* Program,” 236). This is a surprising conclusion since this positive aspect of justification—the imputed righteousness of Christ and its implications—is a major theme of the course.

good and appears right, but is that obedience? The Israelites in Micah 6:6–8 were willing to do many things: give burnt offerings, ten thousand rivers of oil, even their firstborn. They were willing to do anything and everything—except repent. These Israelites, like Cain, had only a commandment-oriented way of life, a life that was divorced from ongoing faith and repentance. The Israelites needed to repent and walk humbly before God—and produce fruit in keeping with that repentance (Mic 6:8). Christianity is a faith-commandment—or faith-love-oriented way of life, a dynamic that cannot be reversed.³⁰ To return to our earlier example, it is a way of life where, by faith, you live out of your union with Christ, repent of your resentment, and then give your wife flowers.

The implications of adoption

Let's turn now to the second of *Sonship's* two main foci—adoption. John Owen noted that in his youth he allowed himself only four hours of sleep a night, to give himself to learning for the “ambition to rise to distinction and power in the church.”³¹ In *Sonship's* terminology, Owen was acting like an “orphan.” This orphan mentality can show itself in all aspects of life, and our common experience confirms it. For

example, who does not struggle with loving the praise of people more than the praise of God? Haven't we all been annoyed or depressed because someone criticized our work or the dinner we prepared? How easy it is to forget the words of Zephaniah, that God our Father takes great delight in us and rejoices over us (Zeph 3:17). In those areas where we are seeking power and prestige, we have forgotten that we already have the highest status possible—we are children of God. Yet believing that God does love us is a great struggle.

Owen was later to write these words, and I paraphrase: “Although your greatest difficulty in the Christian life is believing that the Father loves you, you commit your greatest sin by not believing that he really does love you.”³²

Sonship endeavors to draw attention to areas where we are not believing that we are God's children—for example, anxieties regarding finances, health, marriage, children, or difficult relationships. Are not these worries related to a lack of trust in our heavenly Father? Our anxieties can reveal where our real faith is placed—where we trust in ourselves to control our world, to orchestrate peace, security, or love. Our fears expose where we are trying to manage our lives, apart from trusting God and his Fatherly care and provision for us. Our worries betray our self-centeredness by showing our ambitions, expectations, and demands to have things our own way. Anxieties are great barometers of where we are not believing, not trusting our Father's ongoing love, protection, care, direction, and discipline.

As the orphan can be known by his or her insecure and driven relationships with God and neighbor, the son can be recognized by just the opposite. Adoption (being made sons

³⁰ Consider our union with Christ. In him, we are righteous, accepted, forgiven, pleasing, and beloved sons and daughters. We are called to live out of this union. We are forgiven; now we must be forgiving (Col 3:13). We are pleasing; now we must be pleasing (1 Thess 4:1). We are loved; now we must love others (1 John 4:11). If this dynamic is reversed, we are no longer living by faith and out of our union with Christ. The fact that we are commanded to be pleasing to God does not mean that God is not already pleased with us. The imperative cannot be used to invalidate the indicative. Similarly, we are told to be loving, but this does not mean that God does not actually love us now. Turning this dynamic on its head inevitably results in sanctification by works, whereby we work to remove God's displeasure and earn his love. It is important to note, however, that sin, such as unwholesome speech, still affects our relationship with God; we can grieve the Spirit (Eph 4:30) and come under our Father's discipline (Heb 12:5–11).

³¹ Owen, *The Glory of Christ*, xxiv.

³² “Yea, as your great trouble is about the Father's love, so you can no way more trouble or burden him, than by your unkindness in not believing of it.” John Owen, *Communion with God*, ed. William H. Goold, *The Works of John Owen*, vol. two (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), 21.

and daughters) speaks of an intimate relationship with our heavenly Father. To bring this point home, *Sonship*, seeks to view disciplines such as daily devotions in the context of this relationship. Devotions are not something we do to establish a good record, or to earn the love of God. The person who knows that he is a beloved son does not do good to earn his father's acceptance. He does good because he knows it pleases his father. So the believer does not obey the law because it makes him look right and good; he obeys because it pleases his Father. Here we find ourselves in genuine liberty as the sons of God. We now want to do things that please our Father. The love of God now compels us towards others (2 Cor 5:14). The implications of our adoption lead us to this conclusion: We do not have to perform to earn God's acceptance and love, or the approval of others. We are already sons and daughters; now we must go and live as such.

3 A Response to Critiques of *Sonship*

In section one, we outlined the concept of "sanctification by faith." Then, in section two, we briefly explored how *Sonship* uses this concept for the practical application of the gospel to our lives. Now, in this third and final section, I want to briefly interact with two written critiques of *Sonship*: one by Chad Van Dixhoorn,³³ the other by Jay Adams.³⁴

In responding to these critiques, I want to

focus on two particular areas regarded by Adams and Van Dixhoorn as the major problems of the *Sonship* course: 1) *Sonship's* emphasis on, and even its use of, the phrase "sanctification by faith." 2) *Sonship's* downplaying of the law.

1: *Sonship's* emphasis on, and even its use of, the phrase "sanctification by faith."

Van Dixhoorn and Adams find *Sonship's* emphasis on sanctification by faith a major problem. Van Dixhoorn calls "sanctification by faith" a pietistic phrase, a late innovation that has come from Richard Lovelace, the Keswick Movement, and Methodism.³⁵ For Van Dixhoorn, the concept has caused several problems. One problem is that it creates a roller-coaster Christianity with unhealthy ups and downs; another is that it places an incorrect emphasis on the possibility of huge bounds being made in sanctification.³⁶

Instead of being problematic, the concept of "sanctification by faith" can be demonstrated from the biblical material. Rather than producing a "manic-depressive" Christianity, faith is the instrument for receiving everything from Christ. What is Van Dixhoorn's alternative to sanctification by faith? It is the means of grace.³⁷ The *Sonship* approach, he argues, has ignored or undermined the means that "Christ ordained and commanded for the edification and blessing of his church."³⁸

Yet by minimizing the place of faith in sanctification, has Van Dixhoorn fallen into his own criticism? Why place a clear disjunction between "sanctification by faith"³⁹ and the "means of grace"? Rather, we should affirm

33 Van Dixhoorn, "The *Sonship* Program for Revival." The use of the term "revival" is misleading, but adds to Van Dixhoorn's argument that *Sonship* stresses the "extraordinary," in contrast to the ordinary, means of grace. The course only sporadically uses the word "revival," and encourages us "not to think in terms of revival but continuous renewal" (*Sonship* manual, p. 261). *Sonship* is a discipleship course to encourage ongoing renewal by the Spirit, through greater faith and repentance leading to obedience. This emphasis is not extraordinary.

34 Adams, *Biblical Sonship*.

35 Van Dixhoorn, "The *Sonship* Program," 242.

36 Van Dixhoorn, "The *Sonship* Program," 241–42.

37 Van Dixhoorn, "The *Sonship* Program," 243–44.

38 Van Dixhoorn, "The *Sonship* Program," 245.

39 Even if *Sonship* is teaching a higher-life view (which I do not believe it is), why deny sanctification by faith? Faith as the instrument of sanctification is not unique to higher life teaching.

both, and note the relationship between them. Without faith, these means have no value for us. Without these means, faith becomes mystical. So to dismiss sanctification by faith and affirm the means of grace is to undermine both. Affirming that sanctification is by faith does not disparage the means of grace in any way; rather, by noting the connection between them, we clearly state that our trust must be in Christ, and not in the “means of grace.”⁴⁰

Van Dixhoorn rightly stresses our union with Christ and living out of that union, but in his view, *Sonship* does not maintain this emphasis. However, by minimizing sanctification by faith, has Van Dixhoorn undercut our union with Christ? As we have seen, the benefits of our union with Christ come to us by the Spirit and through faith. Furthermore, our union with Christ itself is also an item of faith. In other words, we are to believe that in Christ we have died to sin (Rom 6:11); that we are holy (Col 1:2), righteous (1 Cor 1:30), and forgiven (Eph 4:32); and that we are God’s children (Gal 3:26). An argument can be made that *Sonship* presupposes our union with Christ. So rather than ignoring our union with Christ, or definitive sanctification, *Sonship* stresses becoming what we already are. Consider three of the lesson titles in *Sonship*: “Forgive as you have been forgiven;” “Pursue as you have been pursued;” and “Love as you have been loved.”

Similarly, Adams’ chief criticism is that *Sonship* has discovered a new insight into the gospel. What is *Sonship*’s new insight? It is sanctification by faith.⁴¹ According to Adams, in adopting this “new insight,” *Sonship* has departed from the historic, Reformed view of sanctification.⁴² He writes: “Sonship postulates a constant return to

preaching the gospel to one’s self as the means of sanctification. . . . But sanctification involves the alteration of one’s lifestyle, which does not occur through believing the good news.”⁴³

Our position is contrary to this. The phrase “preaching the gospel to yourself,” is simply a *Sonship* catch-phrase meaning to live by faith, to fix one’s eyes on Jesus (Heb 12:2), who is the embodiment of this gospel (Rom 1:1–3). In this life, we are called to continue to live by faith in the gospel (Col 1:23). An alteration of one’s lifestyle apart from this faith is neither obedience nor sanctification. Obedience is indeed essential, but it must always flow from faith.

As Adams denies sanctification by faith, so he also opposes *Sonship*’s emphasis on repentance. He writes: “If repentance becomes a lifestyle—something the Bible knows nothing about—it is no longer biblical repentance.”⁴⁴ Adams, in minimizing the central place of faith and repentance, and Van Dixhoorn, in departing from the central place of faith, have both distanced themselves from the vital means of sanctification and have undermined the living relationship between believers and the Spirit of Christ. They have lost much of Thomas Watson’s view that faith and repentance are the two wings by which a Christian flies to heaven.⁴⁵

By emphasizing a life of continual faith and repentance, Adams claims, *Sonship* is returning to infancy and the elementary principles of the faith—like the people in Hebrews 5:11–6:3.⁴⁶ Adams implies that we can go quite a distance down the road of the Christian life, but that to return to faith and repentance is to turn back from all the progress we have made.

However, does this passage in Hebrews teach us to move on from faith and repentance, once that foundation has been laid? What are these

40 It also should be noted that *Sonship* does not minimize means, as seen, for example, by the stress in each lesson on Scripture memorization and prayer.

41 Adams, *Biblical Sonship*, 10.

42 Adams, *Biblical Sonship*, 55. As already argued, sanctification by faith is found in the best of the Reformed tradition.

43 Adams, *Biblical Sonship*, 43–44.

44 Adams, *Biblical Sonship*, 48.

45 Thomas Watson, *The Doctrine of Repentance* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 8.

46 Adams, *Biblical Sonship*, 39.

elementary principles? Were these believers caught up in a foundation based on Old Testament practices,⁴⁷ still wishing to keep Jewish observances along with their Christianity? Did they have an insufficient teaching about Jesus, and were they floundering in Old Testament practices? If so, moving on from these elementary principles is a progression from Old Covenant practices, but it is not a repudiation of Christian faith and repentance. Alternatively, are these elementary principles a solid Christian foundation?⁴⁸ Are they principles that we first heard when we received the gospel?⁴⁹ Of course, we are not to return to those elements that Hughes notes were “characteristic of the evangelistic preaching and practice of the apostles.”⁵⁰ In other words, we are to advance beyond our understanding when we first received Christ. This, however, does not mean that we no longer continue to live by faith and repentance.

Furthermore, suppose that Hebrews does intend to teach us to move beyond faith and repentance, and on to solid food. How does the writer then go on to describe solid food? Hebrews chapters 7–10 concern the high priestly ministry of Christ and Christ’s sacrificial atonement. All four chapters speak of Christ’s finished work, an emphasis found in *Sonship*—for example, in lesson ten on the cross of Christ. Moreover, Hebrews 11 speaks of the obedience that comes from faith—again, the foundational concept used by *Sonship*. Finally, Hebrews 12:1–2 encourages us to fix our eyes on Jesus, throw off the sin that entangles, and run the race. This is nothing less than a command to continue to

live by faith (“fixing our eyes on Jesus”) and repentance (“throw off the sin which so easily entangles”).

2: *Sonship’s* downplaying of the law

The second main criticism against *Sonship* is that it downplays the law, love, obedience, and holiness. Adams wonders where in the course are the commands of Scripture and the stress on obedience.⁵¹

Does *Sonship* uphold and delight in law?⁵² We can answer this question in the affirmative by observing six things:

1 ▶ *Sonship* by its very nature upholds law, for it stresses the only means by which we can keep the law. To emphasize the law does not necessarily mean that one upholds the law. So Jesus can say to his disciples concerning the Pharisees, “So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach” (Matt 23:3). Where there is no life of faith, there is no upholding of the law. We uphold the law by maintaining that there is no genuine holiness apart from living by faith.

2 ▶ The *Sonship* course does directly address many areas of obedience and love. Some examples include: using our tongues to encourage others, forgiving those who harm us, being compassionate and honest, engaging in constructive rather than destructive conflicts, turning from silence or gossip to speaking the truth in love, and growing in love, especially with our spouses where arguments often revolve around who is right. In fact, if there is a key text in *Sonship*, it is Galatians 5:6: “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”

3 ▶ *Sonship* upholds the law by noting that disobedience to the law includes areas of unbelief. In other words, *Sonship* seeks to address disobedience, not only in terms of external ac-

47 F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews, Revised*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1990), 139–43.

48 William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 47a (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1991), 139–40.

49 Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1977), 195.

50 Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 196.

51 Adams, *Biblical Sonship*, 52.

52 I use “law” in a broad sense—everything that God commands a Christian to do.

tions, but also in terms of internal unbelief. This inner disobedience includes self-righteousness that surfaces in excuse-making, anger, complaining, defending ourselves, and attacking others—areas we all struggle with.

4 ▶ *Sonship* emphasizes law by drawing attention to abuses of the law. We often hear about the three uses of the law, but little is said about how we can abuse it. This abuse occurs, for instance, when we misuse law to distance ourselves from people, or to manipulate, intimidate, condemn, or control others. The law is good provided we use it properly. If we abuse law, we have become lawbreakers.⁵³

5 ▶ *Sonship* stresses obedience by emphasizing the crucial role of the Spirit in empowering the life of the church and the individual believer. I believe that *Sonship* captures the New Covenant emphasis on the centrality of the Spirit, in contrast to the Old Covenant where the law is up front.

6 ▶ Perhaps Adams does not intend this, but by departing from sanctification by faith, has he depreciated the law by removing the only means by which we can keep the law? Furthermore, by implying that there is little to repent of, has Adams circumscribed and reduced the righteous demands of law? The law extends to all the thoughts and intentions of the heart. It is boundless (Psa 119:96), and to break the law at one point is to break the entire law (Jas 2:10). We need to repent daily, for we sin daily. Sin cannot

be limited to external disobedience or even attitude. Sin includes a myriad of idols, countless forms of unbelief, and any lack of heart-love for God and our neighbor.⁵⁴

Conclusion

Sonship does not cover every area of the Christian life, and is intended to be supplemental. The theology behind the course can be demonstrated from Scripture and is affirmed by various evangelical theologians from the Reformation down to the present time.

In addition, *Sonship's* teaching on sanctification by faith and the implications of our union with Christ are foundational to the understanding and practice of the Christian life in all its aspects. Many have found it to be a great tool in their own personal lives, in their churches, and on the mission field.

Finally, it is not because of any special insight or godliness that *Sonship* came to be—just the opposite. The course was initially developed for World Harvest missionaries, who were no strangers to self-reliance, self-righteousness, fear, legalism, and “Christian burnout.” *Sonship* was, and continues to be, developed because of our own ongoing need for the gospel. ■

53 Consider Judas, who abuses law by saying, “Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages” (John 12:5). By abusing law, Judas makes Mary look bad, and himself look good. Yet he is not concerned about the law, and particularly not the poor. As the text notes, Judas was a lover of money (John 12:6).

54 Adams argues that *Sonship* has moved into a deeper or higher-life theology (Adams, *Biblical Sonship*, v, 11, 56). Again, the argument may be reversed. Rather than *Sonship* descending into a higher-life movement, has Adams fallen into an implicit higher-life perfectionism, when he writes that repentance is not a lifestyle? If repentance is not a lifestyle, then sinning is not a lifestyle. If this is the case, have we now arrived at the place of sustained victory over sin?



The author, Neil H. Williams (M.Div., Westminster Theological Seminary; D.Th., University of South Africa) is a writer and theologian residing just outside Philadelphia, PA. He has previously pastored in New York City and lectured in South Africa.