

Spontaneous Sanctification

By Irwin J. Habeck

In 2 Corinthians 8:3 there appears the word *αὐθαίρετοι* which has been variously translated “willing of themselves” (KJV), “entirely on their own” (NIV), “of their own accord” (RSV), “of their own free will” (AAT). It was this word which suggested the title of this article. When Paul was with the Macedonians he mentioned almost in passing that the church at Corinth had enthusiastically volunteered to take part in a program which Paul had also inaugurated in Galatia to gather an offering for the relief of the poverty-stricken mother church in Jerusalem. It was not his intention to ask the Macedonians to participate because they themselves were very poor. It was then that the Macedonians without any prompting on the part of Paul not only offered to participate in the collection, but actually begged him to let them participate. Paul made no effort to encourage them to participate and certainly brought no pressure to bear upon them. Their action was entirely spontaneous.

There are other examples of such spontaneous sanctification in Scripture. Usually material possessions were involved. When the tabernacle was to be built, the Lord indeed commanded “that they bring me an offering: of every man that giveth it willingly with his heart ye shall take my offering” (Ex 25:2). But there was a high degree of spontaneity in the response of the Israelites, for we are told: “They came, every one whose heart stirred him up, and every one whom his spirit made willing, and they brought the Lord’s offering” (Ex 35:21). The result was that those in charge of the work told Moses: “The people bring much more than enough...So the people were restrained from bringing” (Ex 36:5,6).

Mary of Bethany provides another example of spontaneous sanctification. There was no precedent for her to follow. No suggestion came to her from anyone. She acted as she wanted to when she took her “alabaster box of very precious ointment” and poured it upon the head of Jesus. Lydia of Philippi showed the same kind of spontaneity when after her baptism, as Luke reports: “she invited us to her home. ‘If you consider me a believer in the Lord,’ she said, ‘come and stay at my house.’ And she persuaded us” (Ac 16:15, NIV).

Such evidences of spontaneous sanctification still occur. Many a congregation has had the the joy of having one of its members come forward entirely on his own to offer a special gift in cash or in kind for some project without any prompting or pressure on the part of others. Sometimes, indeed, offerings of this kind can lead to an embarrassing situation either because something is offered which is not really desirable or which seeks to inaugurate a program which will then have to be financed by budgetary funds. But in most instances by far it is a cause for joy to see this overflowing of a grateful heart which waits neither to be prompted nor directed.

None of these instances of what we have called spontaneous sanctification are completely spontaneous. They are evidences of a living faith. That faith, however, is not something which grows in the soil of the natural heart. It takes a miracle as great as the raising of Jesus to make a believer. Unless that faith in the Savior has first been worked in the heart, there can be no sanctification, spontaneous or otherwise.

Not all sanctification, even though it is a fruit of faith, is spontaneous in the sense that it bursts forth without any apparent effort or struggle. Often the natural self which remains even after faith has been implanted into the heart makes sanctification a real effort. Paul was a happy herald of the gospel. Yet he admits that there were times when even he had to push himself to preach by reminding himself of the penalty for unfaithfulness to a trust: “I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel” (1 Cor 9:16, NIV).

The Lord himself issues threats which He wants us to use in whipping our sinful nature into line. It holds back from balking against the good intentions of the believing nature when it is made to realize that it would be headed for big trouble if it had its way. See the club waved at the sinful nature in these words: “Of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God’s wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them” (Eph 5:5–8, NIV).

It often takes a bitter struggle on the part of the believing nature to get to move in the right direction because the natural self blocks the way. That's what Paul has in mind when he says: "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires" (Ga 5:24, NIV). Crucifying what is still part of us is a painful process far removed from the effortlessness which is implied in spontaneity. There is a note of joy in the Apostle's words when he writes: "With the mind I myself serve the law of God" (Ro 7:25), but it is preceded by the lament: "I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Ro 7:23–24, NIV).

Now we do not wish to depreciate the efforts in sanctification on the part of the Christian, the good soil of whose regenerated heart is often hard put to bring forth only thirtyfold among those who bring forth "some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty" (Mt 13:23); whose daily prayer for daily bread is quickly followed by the plea: "Forgive us our trespasses." All the more, however, do we want to rejoice when in our own lives or in that of our fellow saints we see a bursting forth of what we have called spontaneous sanctification.

The worst possible reaction would be to do what the disciples did when Mary of Bethany performed her spontaneous deed of love by anointing Jesus. They chimed in when Judas grumbled: "why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages" (Jn 12:5, NIV). We know that Jesus quickly set them straight: "'Leave her alone,' said Jesus. 'Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me'" (Mk 14:6, NIV). Still when we are permitted to see an evidence of spontaneous sanctification we are tempted to react by feeling that we have been put to shame and then to cover up by impugning motives or by suggesting that the effort would better have been put forth in some other way.

Then there is always the temptation to shrug off what has been done with a grudging word of praise and to follow it up immediately with a reminder that there is a lot more that ought to be done. This is a mistake which is frequently made in parenting. A child does something which it feels will please its mother and with a beaming face tells her about it. But the smile quickly fades from its face when the mother points out flaws in what was done or after a quick word of praise reminds the child that there are other things which still need doing. A warning against this kind of action is included in the Apostle's words: "Father, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged" (Col 3:21, NIV).

How different was Paul's reaction to the spontaneous sanctification of the Macedonian Christians to which we have referred earlier. He had expected nothing from them because of their deep poverty. But they had begged to be permitted to take part in the collection. And then they gave "beyond their ability" (2 Cor 8:3, NIV). Their motivation was beautiful: "[They] first gave their own selves to the Lord" (v. 5). Paul had nothing but admiration; he saw in it all "the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia" (v. 1). He marvelled at their attitude and their action and said nothing that would detract from their luster.

We hope for the privilege of seeing instances of spontaneous sanctification in our own life and that of others and want to do nothing to subdue it. The Macedonians gave beyond their ability. Paul's life of sanctification was like a spring that could not be stopped no matter how weak he was personally or how much opposition he encountered. Many of us are made of less sturdy stuff. We may take on so many responsibilities that we reach a saturation point and are kept so busy doing what we have to do that we are unable to think of anything additional that we would like to do. But then we need to remember that we cannot gain five talents if we have been entrusted with only two. So let us not make excessive demands upon ourselves or others so that we might retain the ability to do the something extra which we have been calling spontaneous sanctification.

We do not look for recognition or praise for ourselves when our hearts filled with thanks toward the Savior who gave His all for us have moved us to do the unexpected for Him. But we can encourage spontaneous sanctification on the part of others when we do recognize and praise what they have done. Think of the honest praise which Paul accorded to the Macedonians. Think of his warm words concerning the gift which the Philippians had sent to supply his material needs: "They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God" (Php 4:18, NIV). Think of how Jesus praised Mary and guaranteed that this praise would be perpetuated through the ages.

What can we do to promote spontaneous sanctification? Only what we can do to promote all sanctification. That is all that Paul did. He focused attention upon the grace of God: “By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph 2:8,9). When hearts rejoice in this grace and that very faith prompts them to ask, “What can I do for my gracious Lord?” the Apostle reminds them: “We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph 2:10, NIV). There is something spontaneous about all sanctification. “Faith worketh by love” (Ga 5:6). “Every good tree bringeth forth good fruit” (Mt 7:17). Sanctification is inevitable when there is saving faith. But here we have been speaking about the unexpected, an acting without being asked, a soaring above accustomed heights. In an age which makes much ado about planning and programming and organizing and systematizing we are apt to ask, “Isn’t there something that we can do to produce more spontaneous sanctification?” The answer is No. Our interference would only stifle spontaneity. We must plant and water. We must pasture Christ’s sheep. Beyond that we can only watch and wait. Somewhere, sometime we may be permitted to see a rose that has burst into full bloom where we had not even suspected that there was a bud. This is the way of spontaneous sanctification.