



Sanitization or Sanctification?

By Bob DeWaay

A reader phoned me recently and explained how he has seen churches depart from Bible teaching only to institute various programs for better living. He made an intriguing statement: “These programs do not sanctify, they sanitize.” And he was absolutely right about that. Let me unpack that idea and show from Scripture that this is the case.

It is possible to use human wisdom and good advice programs in order to help people achieve better living. It is possible to get an alcoholic sober, an abusive husband to be considerate and caring, a compulsive gambler to quit, a person driven to make money at the expense of family to change priorities, and to help an unhappy person become happy. All of this can be done without any special work of grace. In fact, it can be done without religion at all.

I once heard a debate between two college professors, one an atheist and the other a Christian. Toward the end of the debate the atheist made an interesting statement. He said, “You do not need a god or religion to have a good, happy life. I have been happily married for many years, have wonderful children and grandchildren, live a moral life, and could not ask for anything more from life. I do not need religion and neither do you.” Sadly, many Christians have so redefined Christianity that they would not know how to respond to such a statement. It is true that many people lead happy, relatively moral lives without God. But what they cannot obtain is right standing before the Holy God who created the universe.

When Christianity is reduced to a “better-living-through-religion” program it does not offer anything that some atheists (like the one in that debate) already have. It is telling when churches fill up their docket with seminars designed to help people solve life problems through general revelation. General revelation is available to all through the normal means of knowing. All societies have their own aphorisms which they pass along—their collective “good advice.” It is not a sin to give people good advice gleaned from general revelation, but neither is to confuse that advice with Christ’s mandate: “*Teaching them to observe all that I commanded you*” (**Matthew 28:20a**).

Two key differences differentiate good advice from the commands of Scripture: 1) Good advice is never binding and can be safely (from an eternal perspective) ignored. 2) Good advice is not sanctifying. The atheist with a nice family and a happy life is clearly not sanctified. The term “sanctification” means to be made holy. Holiness cannot be gleaned from general revelation. So those helped by good advice drawn from human wisdom may be sanitized, but unless they repent and believe the gospel they will never be sanctified. Sanctification comes through redemption and the means of grace. Paul wrote: “*But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, “Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord”*” (**1Corinthians 1:30, 31**). That atheist was boasting *against the Lord!* Christians can only boast in the Lord.

Dispensing human wisdom can produce many satisfied customers. A local pastor, known for preaching the prosperity gospel, was exposed in the newspaper for his lavish lifestyle and possible misappropriation of church funds. One of his members wrote a letter to the editor defending the pastor. The letter writer cited all of the positive changes that had happened since attending that church: a better family, better finances, freedom

from addiction, and so forth. But he did not mention anything distinctive to Christianity. Some people who believe the health and wealth gospel actually are healthy and wealthy. But so are some atheists.

Many churches simply have given up salvation and sanctification and settled for sanitization—clean and happy “Christian” living without regard to holiness in the sight of God. Paul discusses this in Colossians:

If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” (which all refer to things destined to perish with use) in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence. (Colossians 2:20-23)

The cleaned up sinner is still “fleshly” because the only alternative to the flesh is the Spirit, and people do not receive the Spirit by works of law:

This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? (Galatians 3:2, 3)

There is no definite article with “law” in the Greek; Paul is speaking of “works of law.” Whether the Mosaic Law or any other, people do not receive the Holy Spirit by works of law.

Anyone without the Holy Spirit is unsaved and unsanctified (see Romans 8:4-8). Anyone without the Spirit is motivated by the flesh (1John 2:16, 17). A person may be able to change his lusts (i.e., from the lust of the flesh to the boastful pride of life) through human wisdom dispensed through a program, but no one can escape the lusts of the world by any means except for a work of grace through the gospel. The law can restrain evil, but it cannot produce holiness. We do not escape from worldly corruption by any means other than the promises of God found in Scripture: “*For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust*” (2Peter 1:4).

This being the case, why have so many churches filled their sermons and programs with ideas gleaned through general revelation that amount to good advice? The answer is found most likely in their constituency. Clear teaching of the word of God will sanctify those who are truly saved. Jesus prayed: “*Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth*” (John 17:17). That means that God does a work of grace on the inside that changes the motivations of the heart, not just certain behaviors (Hebrews 4:12). The behavior does change, objectively, because the Bible contains instruction in godly living that should be taught with the binding authority of God. These instructions are commands, not good advice. They cannot safely be ignored. But the good news is that God’s grace comes to us through His word, enabling and motivating us to obey Him.

A church becomes filled with unsaved people when “better living through Jesus” teachings and programs become the norm rather than gospel preaching and Bible teaching. The people are there to find the sort of life the atheist bragged about having. They may get a nice, happy life through human wisdom dispensed in the name of Christianity.

But holiness is what such persons cannot find through human wisdom. Holiness comes from a work of grace, not a decision to change some things for the better. Sinners lacking the gospel but sanitized through a church program may end up in a worse condition than before. If, in the name of Christianity, the drunkenness or marriage problems go away, those who benefited may think they are saved when, in fact, they are lost. False assurance is dangerous and if not remedied will lead to eternal damnation.

The good advice approach assumes that humans possess the motivation and ability they need; that they simply need instruction on how to put what they already have to work. The real situation is that we are sinners without hope and without God in the world (Ephesians 2:12). We do not have an engineering problem; we have a spiritual one. That spiritual problem is remedied by what God does by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8)—not what we do through human wisdom. The Bible tells us to “pursue” sanctification, because without it we will never see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14). Only sanctification through the blood of Jesus makes us fit to see the Lord. Sanitization through good advice cannot do that.

Published by Twin City Fellowship

Critical Issues Commentary

PO BOX 26127

St Louis Park MN 55426

952-935-3100

www.cicministry.org

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