The hard work of holiness: Protestants and purgatory

by John G. Stackhouse Jr. in the June 11, 2014 issue

Purgatory's seven-story mountain, detail from Dante and the Divine Comedy, fresco by Domenico di Michelino (1417–1491), Florence, Italy.

Among the doctrines that have divided Protestants from Catholics since the Reformation has been the doctrine of purgatory. But recently, fresh overtures from the Catholic side—such as the book by University of Toronto doctoral student Brett Salkeld, *Can Catholics and Evangelicals Agree about Purgatory and the Last Judgment?*—have suggested that purgatory might be less divisive than previously thought. On the Protestant side, a number of key thinkers from P. T. Forsyth to Jürgen Moltmann to Clark Pinnock to John Polkinghorne have engaged the topic. More surprisingly, Jerry Walls, an evangelical philosopher at Houston Baptist University, has offered a full-length defense of purgatory in his 2011 book *Purgatory: The Logic of Total Transformation* (Oxford University Press).

Why would a Protestant, and an evangelical Protestant at that, consider adopting the doctrine of purgatory? He or she wouldn’t if by purgatory one means anything like the classic Roman Catholic understanding of it: a state of postmortem suffering

required in order to make satisfaction for sins one has committed. Even granting that Catholic teaching, like orthodox Christian teaching everywhere, rests our salvation on the work of Christ whose atoning death made satisfaction for the eternal consequences of our sin, the proposal that there is any further satisfaction of any sort to be made for sin—the temporal consequences—is repellent to the classical Protestant understanding of justification.

But what about what happens in the Christian life *after* justification? For both Protestants and Catholics, the next stage is one of sanctification, the process by which we shed our remaining inclinations to sin and acquire a Christlike goodness that hungers and thirsts after righteousness. Clearly we must “be holy, for I am holy” (1 Pet. 1:16, echoing numerous passages in Leviticus). No one can enter into the presence of God without “clean hands and a pure heart” (Ps. 24:4). So between the time of conversion and justification and the time of our final entrance into the life to come (glorification) is the process of sanctification.

And here Protestants have a problem: What happens to Christians who are not entirely sanctified by the end of their lives? How can such imperfect people transit into the perfect state of the world to come? Catholics would say, “We are made ready via the purging of purgatory.”

The typical Protestant response to that claim is that purgatory isn’t taught in the Bible. It certainly is not ever mentioned as such in canonical scriptures and only enigmatically and implicitly even in the Apocrypha. The Protestant hope is that humans will be instantly sanctified of their remaining sinfulness either at the point of death or immediately afterward.

But this hope poses two questions: If sanctification can be given in an instant at the end of life, then why does God not give it to us now? If sanctification is only gradual and difficult in this life, why do we expect that it will be different in the life to come?

Purgatory as a form of sanctification resolves this dilemma. It is simply the extension in the life to come of what we clearly see in our present life: sanctification is a long, painful process that is nonetheless necessary. So the faithful Christian submits to it and, presumably, will look forward to the process being finally accomplished, whether in this life or the next.

Christians who have died and who need to be purged would undergo purgation in the interim before the Lord’s return. Christians who happen to be alive at the time of

Christ's second coming presumably would enter into their own intermediate state. (I say presumably because there is no scripture that explicitly teaches this idea; it's an extension of the logic that we are following here.)

Some might worry that such a concept contradicts scriptural texts that promise immediate communion with Christ after death. But there is no reason to fear that Christians in purgatory will not be with the Lord. First, we are "with the Lord" as soon as we are regenerated and are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Second, the believer would be fully engaged with God in the process of sanctification in purgatory and thus after death would immediately be enjoying a communion with the Lord that would only increase moment by moment. (Indeed, Thomas Aquinas, among others, assures us of the constant and consoling presence of the Holy Spirit in purgatory.)

The medieval doctrine of purgatory seems to have been composed of the following scriptural or doctrinal elements: imagery of purgation by fire; the practice of praying for the dead; sanctification as a gradual, difficult process; and the concept of venial or minor sins, coupled with the doctrine of penance regarding human responsibility to make up for the temporal consequences of such sins. The doctrine was further amplified by the practice of invoking the saints and then by the sale of indulgences that reached its zenith in the high Middle Ages. By the time the Protestant Reformers encountered the doctrine of purgatory, it was a thick complex of ideas and practices reinforced by one of the most fundamental motives of all: raising money. No wonder Luther and his compatriots were repulsed by it and wanted to get rid of the whole thing.

There are hints in theological history that Protestants (for example, Luther's lieutenant Philipp Melanchthon) felt that the horrors of death sufficed to provide the soul with its final purgation. John Wesley taught that entire sanctification was possible in this life, but he allowed that such a blessing was extremely rare, and his general approach to sanctification was the typical Protestant one: it is a gradual, difficult process extending over one's whole life that is finalized in the traumatic moments surrounding death. The 19th-century Princeton theologian Charles Hodge was among those who believed that God could sanctify one instantly at the point of death by sheer divine power, just as Christ healed a man of leprosy even though normally a cure would require extended medical process.

One is left, therefore, with the question of why God does not sanctify us much more quickly and easily than God does. Ironically enough, one of the main Christian

arguments for the persistence of suffering in the world is that the experience of suffering can aid in the process of sanctification. But if sanctification can be granted instantly, then why would God compel people to endure physical suffering? A more coherent view would be that suffering is sometimes a long process precisely because sanctification itself is necessarily a long process.

What would purgatory look like in a version focused upon sanctification? Purgatory would be undergone in an intermediate state between death and the final resurrection. Some Protestants have thought that at the time of death, the human person simply “conks out,” so to speak, and awaits revitalization in the resurrection at the second coming. Most Christians have believed instead that the soul somehow exists consciously in the presence of Christ during the intermediate years between one’s death and resurrection. A Protestant view of purgatory might fit nicely here.

Yet such a conception of the disembodied soul itself seems out of keeping with the Bible’s holistic understanding of the human person as a unit of body and soul. So perhaps instead God gives us a suitably intermediate body in which we experience what we need to experience in purgatory. This idea is an extension of the musings of philosopher Kevin Corcoran on the identity of our dead bodies and our resurrected ones. Corcoran suggests that at the point of death the body undergoes a kind of fission such that one body immediately ceases to live and becomes a corpse while the other body is fit for the resurrection. One can adapt this conjecture to suggest that at death there arises a body useful for the intermediate state. This (penultimate) body then would give way to the (ultimate) resurrection body at the last judgment.

The idea of an intermediate body sufficing the human person for the process of sanctification is curiously reminiscent of the intuitions in both Hebrew and the Greek cultures featured in the Bible—namely, that the place of death (Sheol, Hades) is a kind of shadowy simulacrum of life on earth. The dead are recognizably themselves (they literally have the same faces), but they undergo a diminished experience compared to what we enjoy on earth in this life and that for which we hope in the life to come. Not much should be made of such similarities, of course, but it is perhaps suggestive that other cultures have sensed that there is an extension of life beyond death that looks at least vaguely like what purgatory might be. That seems to be the intuition as well of the medieval Christians who reflected on purgatory—namely, that it was at least strongly analogous to our earthly state and, indeed, was an extension of our earthly experience of being sanctified through the various kinds of rigors

experienced in our state as a body-soul unit. Dante's depiction of purgatory requires this kind of assumption.

As strange as it may seem, the idea of an intermediate body nicely connects the conundrum of how our dead, decayed, and disintegrated bodies connect with our resurrected bodies. Somehow, as we see in the case of Jesus' resurrection, there is a physical continuity of some sort between our first bodies and our ultimate bodies. It is not at all obvious, of course, what that identity is. It may be what some scientists and philosophers call an "information pattern" that remains the same between the two. It may be that there literally is some kind of physical identity and that at least some of the same molecules or particles are identical between one body and the next—although given the dispersal of the original particles into the soil, into the bodies of other animals, and even into new geological structures (for bodies that have been in the ground a very long time), maintaining a strict identity between the original physical components of one's body and one's resurrection body may be missing the point.

The point is that there is some genuine identity in which the old is not replaced by the new but is truly renewed *into* the new. And therefore it may be that there is some kind of intermediate form between the old and the new that Christians like you and me (but unlike the sinless Jesus), who have to be made ready for the world to come, undergo. Those few that are already truly holy at the time of their deaths may then simply sleep comfortably, so to speak, until the coming of the Lord. This is not "soul sleep," but the actual shutting down of the first stage of our life and death and the awakening (it is difficult to avoid language reminiscent of sleep, as the New Testament also uses it) at the time of the resurrection.

Protestants might still say that purgatory is not explicitly taught in scripture. But they would have to acknowledge that the "express elevator at death" model of sanctification is also not explicitly taught in scripture. Indeed, this model of instantaneous sanctification at death seems out of keeping with what is explicitly taught in scripture about the nature of sanctification.

What about the Protestant insistence that purgatory is not necessary because Jesus has paid for our sins in his vicarious suffering on our behalf on the cross and in the triumphant power of his resurrection and ascension? The problem here is in extending the wonderful benefits of justification to cover the quite different category of sanctification. Ironically enough, those who defend a forensic model of

justification seem to drop the forensic categories as they pronounce the justified to also be sanctified. But this is a category mistake of the first order. Indeed, the Reformers themselves never confused the state of being reckoned (officially) righteous with the process of being made (actually) righteous.

The Protestant understanding of justification simply doesn't speak to the question of sanctification. Yes, it rules out any understanding of purgatory as some kind of additional process of satisfaction, as if there are implications of sin in the cosmos that need to be dealt with beyond those answered in the finished work of Christ. But the implications of sin in ourselves do need to be dealt with by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. So the argument against purgatory from champions of justification simply don't advance the conversation.

This understanding of purgatory needs to be kept separate from at least three other questions that tend to arise alongside it. First, it has nothing to do with the possibility of postmortem evangelization. Purgatory is about the sanctification of people who are Christians, whereas postmortem evangelization has to do with the gospel coming to those who did not receive it, or did not receive it in an adequate way, in this life.

Second, purgatory is separate from a universalism that would transform hell into purgatory—a place in which those who are definitely not believers suffer for their sins (since they do not have Jesus to suffer on their behalf) but then eventually are transformed by the patient ministrations of God, succumb to God's beautiful winsomeness, and eventually find the back door to hell and arrive in heaven. Again, purgatory is the place for the purification of people who already are covered by the blood of Christ, who enjoy a full atonement for their sins, who have already cooperated with the Holy Spirit in the earlier stages of sanctification, and who are now simply undergoing willingly the final readying for full enjoyment of the life to come. One can certainly hold to a Protestant view of purgatory—and, indeed, to a Roman Catholic one—without surrendering a traditional understanding of hell as a place of final judgment. Indeed, Roman Catholics have been keeping a very clear distinction between purgatory and hell for a very long time.

Third, purgatory is separate from the notion that human beings have the capacity to cooperate with God in the processes of salvation. Such views are known by the technical term *synergism*. In this view, purgatory has two exit doors, not just one: a person can choose either to continue in the process until one is finally ready to open

the door to heaven, or one can take the other exit and go to hell. The perennial question of whether one can finally desert the Lord during the process of sanctification—whether in this life or the next—is one that I gladly leave to intramural Protestant theological disputes. The main point is that monergists can believe in this version of purgatory as easily as synergists can, since both kinds of Christians believe that sanctification is gradual and difficult and almost never complete at the time of death.

One practical outcome of embracing a Protestant idea of purgatory is that it helps us take sanctification seriously right now. It is not to be deferred to some putatively easier time of life, let alone to death's door or beyond. Death may come sooner than one thinks, and this process must be undergone—somewhere, somehow. No one can shirk the frequent commands in the New Testament to submit oneself to the rigors of God's kind but firm discipline. To suggest instead that Christians will enjoy a kind of express executive elevator at the time of death is to suggest that those who work hard on holiness in this life are wasting their efforts.

Yes, we must never lose sight of the fundamental dynamic in salvation: the grace of God, God's loving power exercised for our salvation. Yet, sinners that we are, we corrupt even the best of teachings, and we easily distort an emphasis upon grace and turn it into a free pass to sin, as Paul warned we might (Rom. 6:1). This Protestant understanding of purgatory confirms the inescapable importance of serious and sustained cooperation with God in the difficult but necessary and ultimately joyful process of sanctification.

Sanctification is about maturation, not merely about purification. One is holy not only because one is innocent of sin—Adam and Eve were that—but because one has lost one's appetite for sin and instead hungers and thirsts for righteousness. One might imagine oneself to be purged of sinful appetites by a direct act of God, but what about the development of healthy appetites for holy things? If God can reprogram those instantly, so to speak, then it is puzzling that he does not do so at the point of conversion. The evidence seems to be that God does not because God cannot (perhaps such appetites can only be cultivated in us over time), and so, again, the idea that God can instantly sanctify us at the point of death seems dubious at best.

Instead, sanctification remains a demanding, incremental process that cannot be short-circuited in this life. Why should we think there are shortcuts in the next? Why not ponder, instead, the prospect of purgatory and then work out our salvation today

in cooperation with the will and work of God as diligently as we can?