


# Doctrine: The Holy Spirit

## What the Holy Spirit Does in Us: 5, Sanctifies Us

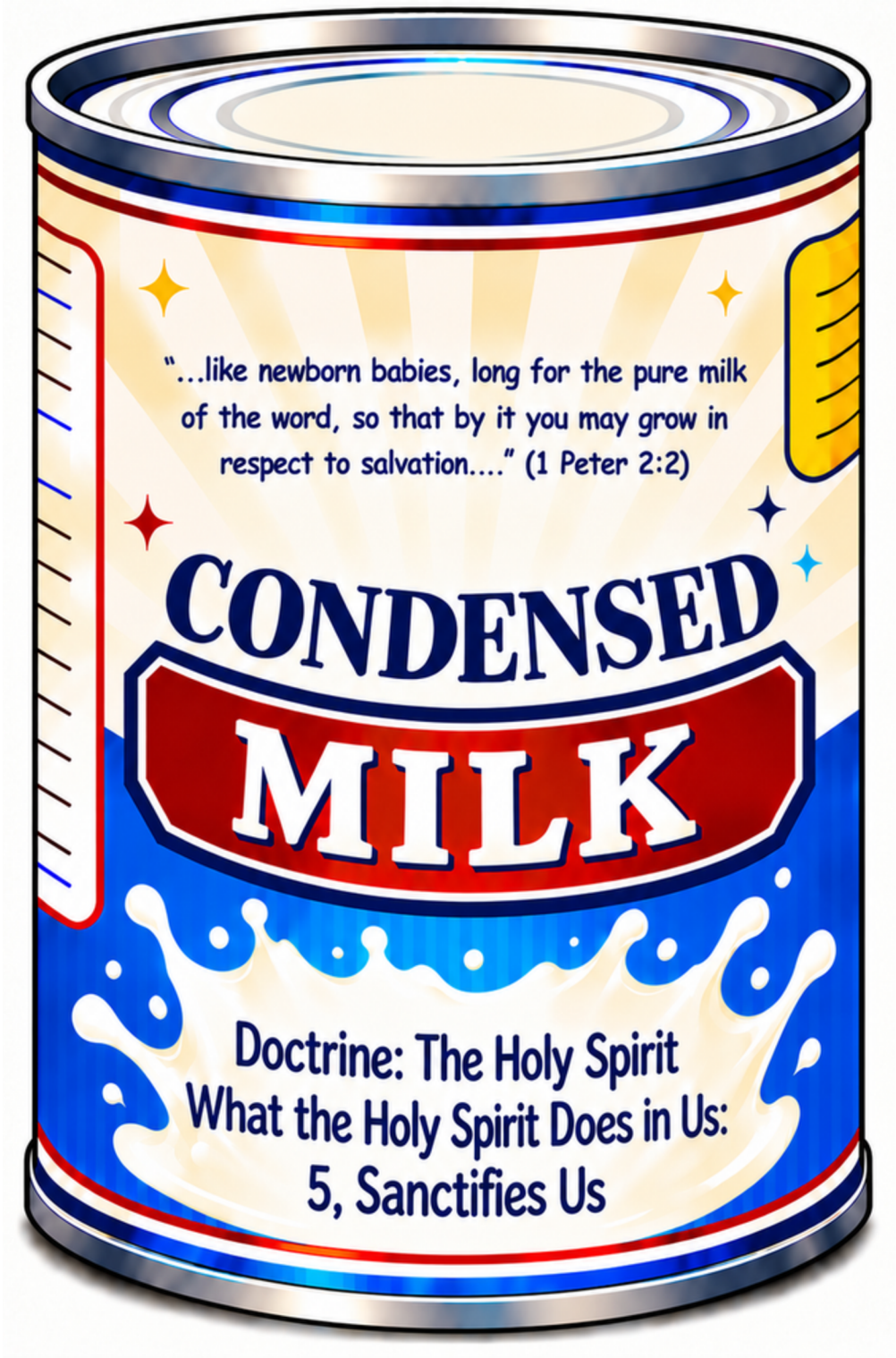
There may be no part of the Spirit's work in us that needs greater attention today than that of his sanctifying work in every believer. This is so because it is a neglected concern today. The call to holiness is often downplayed in preaching as too negative, maybe legalistic, and drowned out by a focus on personal fulfillment and what God can do for you. The impression many have is that being a Christian is not demanding. It is all grace and God's love. Yet personal holiness is to be our concern. It is God's ultimate concern in our salvation. When the Bible says that God works in all things, "for the good of those who love him" it tells us also what the "good" is. It is that we "be conformed to the image of his Son," who is the image of God (Ro. 8:28-29). The backstory to this concern, of course, is that we were created in the image of God. Sadly, that image was all but lost when, in Adam, we rejected God as God. The good news is that God will settle for nothing less than the full restoration of his likeness in us. "It is God's will that you should be sanctified," (1 Thessalonians 4:3). We are to "put off the old self, which is being corrupted," and "put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:24). The writer of Hebrews could not have been more emphatic when he wrote, "Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). We will not go to heaven if we are not holy. Thankfully, the Holy Spirit makes us holy and helps us become holy in life.

The Greek word for sanctified (hagios) means "separate," "set apart," or "holy." When applied to God it stresses God's separateness from creation and his moral perfection. There is no evil or flaw in God. Peter reminds us that "just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do: for it is written, `Be holy, because I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:15-16). Circle "all."

The Bible speaks of our sanctification in two ways. Theologians refer to these as positional and progressive sanctification. The first refers to our position "in Christ," a phrase that appears 74 times in the New Testament. This is a gift given to us, not for our actions but for Christ's. Our union with him gives us perfect standing with God. Progressive sanctification, on the other hand, is personal holiness that matures in us as the Spirit works with our efforts to be like Jesus. Paul refers to these in the same breath when he says, "…to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy" (1 Corinthians 1:2).

Personal, or progressive sanctification depends on our obedience to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, particularly, through God's word. Paul states that he was given the duty to proclaim "the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:16). And when Jesus prayed for us, he said, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth." Knowing and obeying God's word brings about personal holiness.

This implies that sanctification is a progressive work. We mature over time and with effort. It also implies that sanctification is a battle. We will have failures along our path of growth because, "…the flesh (sin nature) fights against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh" (Galatians 5:17) and sometimes the flesh wins. God understands and is patient with us. This is how Paul expressed it: "As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more…" (1 Thessalonians 4:1). He then goes on to list the things they are to avoid, telling them that they "should *learn* to control" their own bodies. Finally, he says, "…for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all of God's family…. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more" (Ibid, 4:9-10). You see, they are pleasing to God, though they are not perfect. And they need to "learn" and be "more and more" holy. God doesn't say, "Until you are perfect, I am not pleased." What does this mean for us today? We must, "work out our salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in us" by his Spirit. We must, most particularly, live in obedience to God's word. Are we doing so?


"...like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation...." (1 Peter 2:2)
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