

Reformed Sanctification: A Doctrinal Defense

Jeremy Kemp
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Dr. Swain
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Upon presenting the Wesleyan perspective of sanctification in *Five Views on Sanctification*, the former Provost of Asbury Theological Seminary Melvin E. Dieter writes that unlike John Wesley, who “relates the fulfillment of the law’s moral obligations to the process and end of sanctification...the more objective views of Reformation orthodoxy...find the fulfillment and satisfaction of the moral law in the act of the believer’s justification.¹ Dieter seems to be making a case that the Reformed doctrine of sanctification consists of little more than an antinomian view of a Christian looking back on their justification and being glad they don’t live under the curse of the law anymore, enjoying their newfound freedom in licentiousness and frivolity rather than faith and obedience. However, those informed by the true Reformed doctrine of sanctification know that there is much more to growing in the Christian life than lawless pursuits of selfishness.

Instead, the goal of this paper is to demonstrate that although the Reformed tradition may be accused of neglecting the doctrine of sanctification by focusing it solely on the satisfaction of the moral law through justification, it is in fact God’s justifying work on man’s behalf that is the very foundation by which man is free to obey God’s law, and a rich doctrine of sanctification flows from this understanding. This thesis will be defended in five ways throughout this paper: First, the parties and their reasons for holding to this negative idea of Reformed sanctification will be identified and their doctrines defined; second, the ways in which sanctification is different from justification will be developed; third, the ways in which sanctification is related to justification will be developed; fourth, the true doctrine of sanctification held by the Reformed church and its relation to justification will be discussed; and finally a rebuttal to the parties

¹ Melvin E. Dieter et al., *Five Views on Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 25.

holding the negative view of Reformed sanctification will be drawn up. The conclusion will then summarize the main arguments and describe the relevance of this issue to the health of the church.

According to theologians such as Herman Bavinck, proponents of the separation of justification and sanctification as two distinct and separate entities are followers of John Wesley. The Methodist movement took “the Reformers’ principles of *sola scriptura* and *sola gratia* and...had their emphasis on personal faith.”² Personal holiness was therefore of utmost importance to their philosophy of ministry. Wesley himself was quoted in a sermon as saying that any religion not engaged in “the renewal of our soul in the image of God, after the likeness of Him that created it, is no other than a poor farce, and a mere mockery of God, to the destruction of our own soul.”³ This “renewal” was theologically grounded in a Wesleyan-keyed term known as prevenient grace. This term, defined by Wesley in his sermon *On Working Out Our Own Salvation*, is explained as such: “Everyone has some measure of that light, some faint glimmering ray, which, sooner or later, more or less, enlightens every man that cometh into the world...so that no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he hath.”⁴ This light Wesley described was said to be the explanation for the human experience of the conscience and could therefore be harnessed for an ever-deepening faith. Of this idea, Wesley issued the imperative to his people to “stir up the spark of grace which is now in you, and he will give you more grace.”⁵

² Melvin E. Dieter et al., *Five Views on Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 14.

³ Melvin E. Dieter et al. quoting Wesley, *Five Views on Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 14.

⁴ John Wesley, *Sermons, on Several Occasions* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1999).

⁵ John Wesley, *Sermons, on Several Occasions* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1999).

This is where the Reformed orthodox position and the Arminian Wesleyan position diverge and what may be the cause of the misunderstanding of Reformed sanctification theology. If the only way to begin and grow in the Christian life is to “stir up” the spark inside of you so that God will give you more grace, it seems as though a strong link between justification and sanctification is lost. On the issue at hand, Bavinck said, “Methodism separates sanctification from justification and faith, and considers the possession of the latter possible apart from that of the former.”⁶ Therefore it seems likely that this vast difference in theological presuppositions might be the cause for Melvin Dieter’s statement and misrepresentation of the Reformed position on Christian growth.

Now, to be fair, there are many ways in which justification and sanctification differ and these must be drawn out if a fully informed understanding of Reformed sanctification is to be established. The *Westminster Larger Catechism* defines justification in the following way: “Justification is an act of God’s free grace unto sinners, in which he pardons all their sins, accepts and accounts their persons righteous in his sight; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed to them, and received by faith alone.”⁷ Similarly, the WSC defines sanctification in the following way: “Sanctification is a work of God’s grace, whereby they whom God has, before the foundation of the world, chosen to be holy, are in time, through the powerful operation of the Spirit applying the death and resurrection of Christ unto them, renewed in their whole man after the image of God; having the seeds of repentance unto life, and all other saving graces, put into

⁶ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Volume 4: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008) 263-264.

⁷ *Westminster Larger Catechism* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d.) 11.

their hearts, and those graces so stirred up, increased, and strengthened, as that they more and more die unto sin, and rise unto newness of life.”⁸ One device useful to summarize the primary difference between the two is this: Justification is God’s *declaring* us righteous, sanctification is God’s *making* us righteous.⁹ Justification is a *forensic*, or legal, act wherein God works on behalf of his people, implanting them with the righteousness of Christ and giving them the ability to see their sinfulness and turn away from it to faith in Christ. Romans 4:5 demonstrates this point well in that the “ungodly” are justified by faith counted to them as righteousness. This word justified when used elsewhere in Scripture, such as Deuteronomy 25:1 where the judges were charged with justifying the innocent, must then mean a pronouncement of innocence over someone. Sanctification on the other hand “is not, like justification, a legal act of God, but a moral and re-creative activity, by which the sinner is renewed in his inner being and made to conform ever-increasingly to the image of God.”¹⁰ In this God calls his people out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Pet 2:9) and thereby “transfers us from the sphere of sin to the sphere of God’s holiness, from the kingdom of Satan to the kingdom of God.”¹¹ In this new standing with God, since the One who called us is holy, we are therefore called to be holy as well (1 Pet 1:15).

While on the topic of God’s works on our behalf, herein is another distinction between justification and sanctification. Justification is monergistic, meaning that it is only a work of God on the behalf of a sinner dead in his trespasses. It is God alone who can *make* “him to be

⁸ *Westminster Larger Catechism* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d.) 12.

⁹ John M. Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord: An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2006) 212.

¹⁰ Louis Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1933) 267.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 213.

sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21 ESV). Sanctification contrarily is synergistic, meaning that both God and man work together towards the end of conforming him to the image of God.¹² How is it possible to participate in the work of God in a human life? We certainly know that “sanctification...is in the first place a work of God” but at the same time “since God enables them both to will and to work” so “believers must work out their salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil 2:12 ESV).¹³ To put it this way, “While the grace of justification is 100% the work of the triune God and 0% the work of the justified sinner, the grace of sanctification is 100% the work of the triune God and 100% the work of the sanctified saint.”¹⁴

In summary of the first point, both the Wesleyan and Reformed theologies agree that there are some distinct differences between the graces of justification and sanctification. It is of utmost importance that they retain their unique characteristics as they inform us much better as to the work of God on our behalf in the *ordo salutis*. So to the Reformed viewpoint, sanctification has not been absorbed or neglected into the “storm center of the Reformation”¹⁵ of justification but remains a wholly separate doctrine with its own function in the order of salvation for the people of God.

Now that the distinctness between the two have been developed, the next step is to explore the rich interplay between justification and sanctification. First, in essence, you can't

¹² James Montgomery Boice and Philip Graham Ryken, *The Doctrines of Grace: Rediscovering the Evangelical Gospel* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2009) 152.

¹³ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Volume 4: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008) 235.

¹⁴ Swain L.9 P.4.

¹⁵ J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2001) 164.

have sanctification without justification. If there is no initial work on the Christian's behalf that provides for them a right standing before God, then they will have no desire or ability to pursue the holiness that God calls them to enjoy. To this point, Bavinck makes this dynamic statement: "Certainly there can be no peace of mind and conscience, no joy in one's heart, no buoyant moral activity, or a blessed life and death, before the guilt of sin is removed, all fear of punishment has been completely eradicated, and the certainty of eternal life in communion with God fills one's consciousness with its consolation and power."¹⁶ Similarly, the Westminster Confession chapter 17 connects justification to sanctification in the following way:

Such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before him, may in this life be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God...[that] certainly is not a bare conjectural and probably persuasion...but an infallible assurance of faith, founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidences of those graces unto which these promises are made...[and] the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God.¹⁷

So those "endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before him" are those embarking on the process of sanctification, and because they have a desire to be more like God they can be assured that they will persevere in this desire. Their assurance then is not an unsubstantiated hopefulness but it is "founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation," i.e. justification, and "the inward evidences of those graces," i.e. sanctification. Joining the two is the statement that the

¹⁶ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Volume 4: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008) 179.

¹⁷ G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: For Study Classes*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2004) 170.

“inward evidences” of sanctification are the reason why the “promises of salvation,” pronounced in justification, were originally made. A.A. Hodge noticed the same dynamic in that “true assurance leads to increased diligence in the practice of holiness...candid self-examination and a desire to be searched and corrected by God...and constant aspirations after more intimate fellowship with God.”¹⁸ A logical circularity herein ensues; the hope created by knowing that we are declared righteous forever before a holy God, if true and sincere, will cause us to desire him more in thankfulness, in desiring him more we will want to please him more, and in pleasing him more hope will be stirred within us. Our heart will respond as described in 1 John 3:3 (ESV): “Everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.”

A second way in which justification and sanctification are related is this, they are both primarily graces merited to us by Christ. The righteous legal standing and resulting eternal life given to us in justification is just one of the many blessings that we receive through the work of Christ. Justification opens the door to many other blessings that Christ mediates to his people. The “apex, the high point in our relationship with God,”¹⁹ the bridge between justification and sanctification, the primary reason for Christ’s work of taking our sins and giving us his righteousness is this: adoption. Galatians 4:4-5 confirms this point that “God sent forth his Son...to redeem those who were under the law, *so that* we might receive adoption as sons.” Therefore, if “justification is the basic blessing on which adoption is founded; adoption is the crowning blessing , to which justification clears the way.”²⁰ And as a result of this adoption,

¹⁸ G. I. Williamson quoting Hodge, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: For Study Classes*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2004) 172.

¹⁹ John M. Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord: An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2006) 207.

²⁰ J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2001) 167.

“God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” (Gal 4:6 ESV). So through justification we are not only declared righteous before a holy God, but because of this righteousness we are brought into the family of God, of which Jesus is the primary member, the only Son of the Father. From this new relationship, the adopted son or daughter is able to share in the blessings of the Father to the Son as follows: “Have his name put upon them; receive the Spirit of adoption; have access to the throne of grace with boldness; are enable to cry, Abba, Father; are pitied, protected, provided for, and chastened by him as by a father; yet never cast off, but sealed to the day of redemption, and inherit the promises, as heirs of everlasting salvation.”²¹

In this coming of the Holy Spirit, sanctification is enabled as a new ability to obey is given. The good works that flow from the indwelling of the Spirit within us is known rightly as “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal 5:22-23), “so, as we see ourselves growing in grace, we should thank and praise God...[for] it is by his grace that we are able to grow at all.”²² In addition, as we all know from experience, a loving Father will discipline his children for the purpose of bringing them to maturity in him. And since justified Christians are now called sons and daughters the same would apply to them. “For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?” says the writer of Hebrews (12:7 ESV). The goal of this discipline is thus, that it would “[yield] the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Heb 12:11 ESV).

Similarly, we are sanctified as we are “imitators of God, as beloved children” (Eph 5:1 ESV).

For since we are in God’s family, is it not natural that we should imitate our elder brother, Jesus

Christ? Therefore justification performs a vitally necessary function for the efficacy of

²¹ G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: For Study Classes*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2004) 145.

²² John M. Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord: An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2006) 215.

sanctification, it provides us with the familial relationship that becomes the context of our growth in the Christian life. This demonstrates just how committed our God is to the holiness of his people, he was willing to kill his own Son so that we as orphans gone astray might have a way into his family, the privileges of which “can be summed up in the word *inheritance*.”²³

Now that the primary misunderstandings of the Reformed viewpoint of the relationship between justification and sanctification have been explained, it seems only fitting that a full demonstration of the doctrine of sanctification and it applied would further enhance the argument of the validity of this theological truth. First, the theology of sanctification. Sanctification has two senses of the same word, differing only by the time at which it takes place: definite and progressive. Definite sanctification refers to the “once-for-all event” at which point “each of us joins God’s holy people” that gives us “a basic reorientation of the mind, will, and affections, so that we have a new desire to do God’s will.”²⁴ This is demonstrated throughout the New Testament, but very explicitly it occurs in Romans 6 where the contrast is drawn between the old self being “crucified with him [Christ] in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing” (v.6) and the new self being “dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (v.11). Now any Christian can judge from experience that they are not sinless. So how is one to reconcile this seeming contradiction? 2 Corinthians 5:16 speaks to this question with the answer: “From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh” (ESV). Hence, definite sanctification a doctrine that results in a believers outlook being such that they “should see themselves and each

²³ John M. Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord: An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2006) 207.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 213-214.

other as persons who are *genuinely* new, though not yet *totally* new.”²⁵ On the other side of the coin is progressive sanctification. If we have determined that there is a definite break with the sinful nature at salvation but sin still remains, God must have provided a way to deal with this remnant of sin in our earthly bodies. Sanctification therefore is also an ongoing process in which we are made more and more in the image of God every day. The benediction from the writer of Hebrews sets forth the juxtaposition of these two ideas very clearly: “Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus...equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ” (13:20-21 ESV). “Brought” is in the past tense, referring to the definite sanctification that has already taken place, while at the same time calling for believers to be equipped so that they can be pleasing in his sight, referring to the progressive sanctification that will take place until the Second Coming of Christ.

Closely related to this conversation of definite and progressive sanctification is the idea of active and passive sanctification. The question is, if it is God that does the work that makes one pleasing to himself, do I just sit by the wayside and wait for my sanctification to take place? Of course, the logical answer to this question is no, but why? Sanctification in this way is passive like it is definite, it “as much as justification is gift and a work of God”²⁶ done on our behalf. Even in its progressive state, in a sense, it is the work of the Holy Spirit that is bringing you further along in holiness. This tension is most pointedly addressed in Philippians 2:12-13 as Paul exhorts us to “work out our own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works

²⁵ Melvin E. Dieter et al., *Five Views on Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 74.

²⁶ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Volume 4: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008) 252.

in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (ESV). John Frame illustrates this point from the Old Testament by saying, “Just as God told Israel in Exodus 19 that they were already his holy people but also commanded them in Leviticus 18 to be holy as he is holy, so in definitive sanctification he tells us that we *are* his holy people, and then he commands us in progressive sanctification to *become* holy as he is holy.”²⁷ Exactly what this work looks like on the part of man will be addressed shortly, but it is helpful to notice that both God and man are responsible for the ethical advancements that occur inside.

Finally, it is helpful to frame our theology of sanctification under the rubric of “union with Christ.” In his book *Union with Christ*, J. Todd Billings sets forth a cogent argument for the union of Christ to be the best way to view our justification and sanctification: “The good news is that in Jesus Christ, we receive forgiveness and new life. We did not manufacture this news. The news is not about our own efforts to imitate Christ or to do what Jesus would do. First and foremost, the good news of the gospel is the gift of actually being united to Jesus Christ - a gift received from God in a way that activates us to live into this new life, coming to us as part of God’s new creation.”²⁸ Biblically, union with Christ is rooted in a covenantal approach to passages such as John 15:5 where abiding in the vine is related to faith and obedience.²⁹ Walter Marshall, in his famous work *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification: Growing in Holiness by Living in Union with Christ* purports the same idea, saying, “The key to living a holy life is union

²⁷ John M. Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord: An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2006) 215.

²⁸ J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ*, Kindle ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

²⁹ Ibid.

with Christ.”³⁰ Since Jesus is the only one who has lived a perfectly holy life, our only hope of doing anything good is to be in union with the only one who is good.

Now that a systematic theological understanding of the doctrine of sanctification has been established the final discussion of the defense of Reformed sanctification, the discussion of the practical outworking of this theology, can be undertaken. I will use Steven Childers’ characteristics of spiritual formation from his article *True Spirituality* to frame my argument, they are repentance, faith, and obedience. First, repentance very simply is “turning heart affections away from idols.”³¹ The process is described by the identification of a heart idol, defined as anything taking the place of ultimate worship in one’s life instead of God, and the mortification, or “taking radical action against it, sapping the life-dominating power” of that idol.³² Romans 13:14 calls us to this task of “[making] no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” and we know from the first and second commandments that our hearts will desire to worship created things rather than the Creator. This is part of the process of progressive sanctification that will characterize our spiritual lives forever. It is a moment-by-moment activity that will lead us ultimately to what J.I. Packer calls “downward growth,” or the “progress into personal smallness that allows the greatness of Christ’s grace to appear...that in [ourselves we] are nothing and God in Christ has become everything.”³³ This leads us therefore into our second topic, the process of seeing Christ as our everything, faith. Again, simply defined, since repentance is the turning away of heart affections from idols, faith is “turning heart affections to

³⁰ Walter Marshall, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification: Growing in Holiness by Living in Union with Christ*, ed. Bruce H. McRae (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005) 39.

³¹ Steven L. Childers, “True Spirituality: The Transforming Power of the Gospel”, n.d., www.gca.cc, 5.

³² *Ibid*, 6.

³³ J. I. Packer, *Rediscovering Holiness* (Ann Arbor: Servant Publications, 1992) 121.

Jesus Christ.”³⁴ Another word for faith is consecration. Consecration is described in Romans 12:1-2 as offering ourselves to God “as living sacrifices” instead of conforming to “the pattern of this world” and in 2 Corinthians 3:18 as “beholding the glory of the Lord” and thereby “being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (ESV). It is in the worship of our gracious God who justifies rebellious sinners and breaks the power of sin by definitive sanctification that we are changed more and more into the image of Jesus Christ, who by his life and death was the agent for those occurrences. These two distinct acts of repentance and faith, according to Calvin, are constantly linked, for “can true repentance exist without faith...by no means.”³⁵ Therefore the work of obedience, according to Reformed sanctification, can be practically described as repentance and faith.

The argument for the Biblical and theological solvency of the Reformed doctrine of sanctification has now come full circle. Although the Reformed tradition may be accused of neglecting the doctrine of sanctification by focusing it solely on the satisfaction of the moral law through justification, it is in fact God’s justifying work on man’s behalf that is the very foundation by which man is free to obey God’s law, and a rich doctrine of sanctification flows from this understanding. Throughout this paper it was demonstrated that the Reformed position of justification and sanctification are based on Biblically, historically, and theologically sound principles and contrarily that the Wesleyan critique is based on a separation of the true *ordo salutis* and ultimately in a lack of assurance of faith. But we know that “to separate justification from sanctification would be to accept the legal status of being God’s children but to refuse to

³⁴ Steven L. Childers, “True Spirituality: The Transforming Power of the Gospel”, n.d., www.gca.cc, 6.

³⁵ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1536) 481.

move to God's house, to call God Father, and to *act* as an adopted child."³⁶ There is much confusion in the church today about just how to go about growing as a Christian. In summary, my hope is that we learn how to not just "*act* as an adopted child" but truly enjoy learning to live as a part of God's family, the only heritage we have that will last forever.

³⁶ J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ*, Kindle ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

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But sanctification is one of the gifts of the gospel of Jesus Christ, so we must think about the way in which he makes his redeemed holy as a grace. In these audio lectures, Michael Allen defines holiness in theological terms by connecting it to core Christian doctrines such as the character of God, the nature of creation, and the covenantal shape of life with God. Sanctification: Audio Lectures feature the author's expert teaching and are an ideal resource for traditional students, students in distance and online-learning courses, and self-learners wanting to better understand Christian theology. Language: English Category: Religion & Spirituality Series: Zondervan Biblical and Theological Lectures: 1 Translator 1 result for "additional-statements-in-defence-of-my-doctrinal-position-and-in-vindication-of-my-plea-for-doctrinal-reform-by-fergus-ferguson-paperback". Skip to main search results. Department. Books. Advertisement. Additional Statements in Defence of My Doctrinal Position and in Vindication of My Plea for Doctrinal Reform. A Defense of this Vital Doctrine--What Does the Bible Really Teach? [PDF Format]. The Doctrine of Practical Sanctification (Living a Holy Life) The Christian Life The Doctrine of the Christian Life--Theology Notes by Alva McClain What is the Believer's Rule of Life? What Part and Place Does the Law Have in Sanctification? The Doctrine of Israel and the Church Dispensationalism Problems with Reformed Theology A Comparison and Contrast Between Israel and the Church Significant Dates in Israel's History - Including Biblical History, Secular History, Modern History and Prophetic History Our Love for the Jews The Sabbath and The Lord's Day [PDF Format] The Use of the Term "Israel" in the N.T. -with special.