

**The Use of the Aorist Tense in Holiness Exegesis**  
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The purpose of this article is twofold. First, I will present a brief historical review of the way in which the aorist tense has been used by many holiness advocates. Then I will summarize the current grammatical understanding of the aorist tense and suggest some of the implications for holiness exegesis.

**Historical Survey**

When one reads recent holiness proponents who make reference to the aorist tense in connection with their exposition of holiness, he finds them speaking almost in unison. They assert that the aorist tense is an indicator of the “crisis nature” of sanctification. To quote W. T. Purkiser, the aorist tense is “another impressive line of evidence for the instantaneousness of sanctification.”<sup>1</sup> Wiley expresses himself by stating that “when the aorist is used, it denotes a momentary, completed act without reference to time.”<sup>2</sup> And, more recently, Richard Howard has stated that “the basic significance of the aorist *aktionsart* is that it depicts a crisis act in distinction from a progressive process”<sup>3</sup> (**emphasis is Howard’s**). All three of these men happen to represent the Church of the Nazarene, but similar statements can be found in other circles of holiness advocates as well.<sup>4</sup> The essence of these accounts is that the use of the aorist tense proves that a certain action is of an instantaneous, once-for-all character. From where does this understanding come? When one checks the references listed for support, he does find reference to some Greek grammars; but they are normally of only an introductory level or of a relatively old date.<sup>5</sup> Also, it is noticed that most of the references are very abbreviated, not considering some of the important contextual relationships in the original source. The overall impression is that the authors get their basic idea from somewhere other than their own study of the Greek grammars. This is confirmed when it is observed that in their exposition of the use of the aorist tense they all lean very heavily on a chapter in *Mile-Stone Papers* by Daniel Steele<sup>6</sup> and on a book by Olive Winchester that is self-admittedly written in defense of Steele.<sup>7</sup>

In these two books then, we have the primary exposition of the understanding of the aorist tense in holiness circles. Therefore, I will deal with them, understanding that any conclusions I reach will reflect on the other books that use them for a source. Steele in his article, which I believe to be the first of its kind in holiness circles, uses as his primary source on the aorist tense an intermediate Greek grammar by W. Goodwin.<sup>8</sup> He quotes Goodwin on the aorist tense to the effect that “the aorist indicative indicates simple momentary occurrence of an action in the past time.”<sup>9</sup> He then proceeds to infer from this that the aorist always refers to a momentary, once-for-all action.<sup>10</sup> In this inference he has missed the point of Goodwin’s statement by confusing the difference between (a) speaking of something as a whole in the simplest possible manner, and (b) actually implying that the event is instantaneous. Goodwin did not mean to imply that the latter was always the case as is seen when he says that the aorist must be conceived as having “none of the limitations as to completion or repetition.”<sup>11</sup> My point is that Steele’s thesis, which has become almost a maxim in some holiness circles, is based primarily on an inadequate understanding of one statement in an intermediate grammar that was written before the turn of the century and before the extraordinary amount of work that has taken place in Greek grammar during this century.

The one objection that can be raised against this analysis is the book by Winchester. For in this book we find reference to some of the leading Greek scholars of our time by a proficient Greek instructor who believes she has supported Steele’s thesis. I would start my discussion of this book by first saying that it is the only serious grammatical approach to this issue of which I am aware. However, it makes the same false assumption as Steele that the “manner of speaking” of an aorist tense can be equated with the “manner of reality.” This is most evident in her discussion of A. T. Robertson whom she refers to as the leading authority of her time. In particular she illustrates this in her discussion of what Robertson called the constative aorist. In essence the constative aorist is a use that views a process which took a period of time to complete from a “bird’s eye view.” The point is that this type of aorist normally does not refer to a crisis action. Winchester finds it impossible to deny that this type of aorist does occur.<sup>12</sup> However, she assumes this is a minor usage and not characteristic of the fundamental significance of the aorist.<sup>13</sup> She does realize that the nature of the verb is important in deciding the significance of the aorist but feels she can conclude by quoting Robertson that, essentially, the aorist tense “. . . always means point-action.”<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, she does not quote the next sentence in Robertson where he adds, “The tense has nothing to do with the fact of the action, but only with the way it is stated.”<sup>15</sup> Moreover, Robertson argues that the constative aorist is the most common type of aorist in the New Testament and is the one that truly defines the nature of the aorist,<sup>16</sup> as opposed to Winchester. At first the difference may seem slight, but it is the difference between expecting the aorist to be referring to a crisis event unless it can be proven otherwise or the reverse of only assuming crisis content in the aorist when the context demands it. The first position has been that of the majority of holiness proponents. The second is the position of the leading Greek grammarians and, I believe, the one true to the Greek language. I will attempt to show this by now turning to a brief summary of

the significance of the aorist tense as found in many of the important recent grammars.<sup>17</sup>

## Grammatical Summary

The first step in describing the aorist tense is to compare it with the other main tenses. Robertson's summary is helpful at this point:

The three essential kinds of action are thus momentary or punctiliar when the action is regarded as a whole and may be represented by a dot ( . ), linear or durative action which may be represented by a continuous line \_\_\_\_\_, and the continuation of perfected or completed action which may be represented by this graph .\_\_\_\_\_ .<sup>18</sup>

The aorist tense is essentially the first kind of action described, which is represented by a dot. However, a very important distinction must be held in mind. The point is not meant to suggest a temporal quality of singleness, for time is not essential to the aorist. The action of the aorist is timeless (outside of the indicative mood) and is best defined as action in "its simplest form."<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the Greek term *aoristos* means "undefined." As Turner expresses it, "Sometimes the aorist will not even express momentary or punctiliar action but will be non-committal; it regards the action as a whole without respect to its duration."<sup>20</sup>

At this point some clarity can be gained by confronting an apparent assumption of the approach to the aorist tense taken by the holiness proponents referred to above. While it is seldom expressed explicitly, there is evident in much of their discussion the assumption that the present tense is the fundamental or ground tense in the Greek language (evidently because the lexical form is in the present tense) and that the use of the aorist tense is always for purposes of emphasis. On the contrary, it can be shown that the aorist tense is the ground tense, expressing simple action, and that the present and perfect tenses are the ones utilized for emphasis. Robertson himself expresses this view, both regarding logical priority<sup>21</sup> and its actual usage. He summarizes:

As I see it, the aorist preserved the simple action and the other tenses grew up around it. It is true that in the expression of past time in the indicative and with all the other moods, the aorist is the tense used as a matter of course, unless there was special reason for using some other tense. It gives the action "*an und für sich*."<sup>22</sup>

Further confirmation of this is found in the *mi* conjugation verbs. This is the oldest conjugation of the verb, comprised of the elementary stem of the verb plus the personal pronouns.<sup>23</sup> The important point for our purposes is that the stem of this conjugation is found in the aorist tense, not the present—which utilizes a reduplication in its form. Here the aorist is the base form morphologically as well as logically. Also, comparison with other languages such as Hebrew and Sanskrit will show a similar phenomenon. This should establish Robertson's point that one should see the aorist as primarily the most simple way to express a verb, without meaning to imply anything as to its continuity or lack thereof.

Having thus established the basic meaning of the aorist, it is important to differentiate three shades of emphasis which can be found within this basic meaning. Moulton summarizes this well when he defines the aorist as punctiliar action which:

. . . represents the point of entrance (Ingressive, as *balein* “let fly,” *basileusai* “come to the throne”), or that of completion (Effective, as *balein* “hit”), or it looks at a whole action simply as having occurred, without distinguishing any steps in its progress (Constative, as *basileusai* “reign,” or as when a sculptor says of his statue, *epoiesen ho deina* “X. made it”).<sup>24</sup>

Moulton illustrates this distinction with the graph:  $A \rightarrow B$ , denoting motion from A to B. Emphasis on A is characteristic of the ingressive idea. Emphasis on B is characteristic of the effective, and the constative would be “the line reduced to a point for perspective.”<sup>25</sup> A convenient example of each of these can be found in the first chapter of the Gospel of John. The ingressive is no doubt found in *egeneto* (1:14) which suggests the beginning of the incarnated life. The effective is found in the use of *elabomen* (1:16) referring to the completion of the activity of receiving. And the constative use is obvious in *eskenosen* (1:14) where the whole of Jesus’ life is summarized. More explicit and detailed lists of examples of these three shades of meaning can be found in both Moulton<sup>26</sup> and Robertson.<sup>27</sup>

The question which now arises is how one determines which of these three shades of meaning is to be understood in a particular passage. Robertson sums it up by saying that we must consider the “total result of word (meaning, rm), context and tense.”<sup>28</sup> That is, the context and the meaning of the word are the primary categories (assuming the tense is aorist). Here Burton is helpful when he points out that the ingressive aorist belongs primarily to verbs which denote the continuance of a state (such as *sigain* “to be silent”; *sigesai* “to become silent”). And that the effective aorist belongs to verbs which denote effort or attempt (such as *koluein* “to hinder”; *kolusai* “to prevent,” i.e. “to succeed in hindering”).<sup>29</sup> The constative is the predominant use in the Greek of the New Testament and embraces most of the remaining verbs.

In dealing with the constative idea, another point needs to be made. We have already seen that it refers to the way one “sees” the action, not to the activity itself. Thus one can speak of a forty-six-years construction of the temple in the aorist (John 2:20) or of a single act such as the anointing of a man’s eyes (John 9:6). The decision between these alternatives cannot be made on the basis of the tense alone but rather primarily from the context and in some cases from the meaning of the verb. Thus, for example, if one were to say, “I shot the gun,” in Greek using the aorist tense, it would be impossible to determine if only one shot were fired or if more than one, unless the context specified. This point is of crucial importance to our investigation.

Before leaving the subject of the constative aorist, one more point should be stressed. This is the growing predominance of the constative usage in New Testament Greek. Moulton deals with this at length in the context of a discussion on the relation of the constative aorist to the use of perfective prepositions.<sup>30</sup> His primary point is that the use of the perfective

prepositions usurps much of the realm of the ingressive and effective aorists in regular verbs, leaving the verb simplex with primarily the constative meaning in its occurrences. Also, the number of aorists referring to single actions is said to decline.<sup>31</sup> The result of all this is that we must give the constative aorist much more emphasis in exegesis than has usually been done. We have now finished summarizing the essential meaning of the aorist. This would apply to the use of the aorist in the indicative (where the idea of past time is added to the concept of aorist aspect), as well as to the imperative and subjunctive, infinitive and participle. There are, however, two special usages we must discuss briefly before closing this section.

The first special usage is that of the aorist participle in the predicate position. As is well known, this is usually translated as a circumstantial or supplemental clause, showing action prior to the action of the main verb to which it is related. However, both Robertson and Moulton show several examples where the aorist participle shows action that is simultaneous with the action of the main verb.<sup>32</sup>

The second special usage is in regard to prohibitions in Greek. It has come to be accepted as a rule that the present prohibition implies the cessation of an activity already underway while the aorist prohibition refers to the forbidding of an action prior to its inception. Robertson and Moulton both agree with this general rule;<sup>33</sup> however, they stress that the writings of Paul do not seem to be totally amenable to this distinction.<sup>34</sup> This is especially true regarding the present imperative where it seems hard to believe, for instance, that he means to imply that Timothy was neglecting his “charism” in 1 Timothy 4:14. The most widely accepted solution proposed to this problem is that the present prohibition is not aimed so much at the forbidding of a present action as at the enjoining of a negative action, as per Gildersleeve.<sup>35</sup> Thus *me poiei* which is normally translated, “Stop doing!”, may be translated, “Do not do, as you are in danger of doing!” or “Continue not doing!” However, I would add a caution that such renderings should be utilized only when they are shown to be necessary by the contextual inappropriateness of the usual rendering.

### **Exegetical Investigations**

With this summary of the meaning of the aorist tense in mind, we can now return to our primary question—What is the significance of the aorist tense in the area of holiness exegesis? To answer this question it is beneficial to first present a brief excursus on the doctrine of holiness. Following Turner<sup>36</sup> I recognize four basic aspects that are found in some form in holiness thought. The first aspect is that of positional holiness, or the holiness derived from association with the Divine. This aspect is accepted by virtually all of Christianity. The second aspect (logically the last) is that of final glorification or the belief that the eschatological goal for man is perfect conformity to God’s will. This too is universally accepted. The third aspect is one that is more distinguishing of holiness groups, namely the belief that there should be a growing expression of actual holiness in the person who is already positionally holy. That is, the holiness movement takes seriously the demands of the gospel for a change in the life of the Christian. The final aspect is the crucial one that has become the

demarcation line between the holiness movement and other members of the Christian fellowship. Essentially, this aspect is the assertion that there is some sense in which the Christian can be completely or “entirely” holy in this life. It is crucial, however, to note that this perfection” of holiness is normally conceived of in terms of commitment and not faultless expression.<sup>37</sup> Also, it must be noted that the “completeness” of this experience is normally asserted through the endorsement of a second “crisis” in the life of the believer at which time he makes the total commitment to God.

The question of our investigation is whether the aorist tense can indicate the action of a verb expressing holiness to be of this “crisis” nature. We have seen that it does not do so in and of itself. The only way that such an interpretation could be made is by a careful consideration of both the tense of the verb, the meaning of the word, and the context. Therefore, to attempt to answer the question, I will now undertake an analysis of several of the key passages put forth by Steele and others as proofs of their position and determine if these passages really suggest this idea. During these investigations I will make other general reflections on the relation of the aorist tense to the doctrine of holiness as well.

I will first consider the passages which utilize the word *hagiazō*, “to sanctify.” As one works with this word, he becomes aware that it has two major shades of meaning. In an active sense it means to consecrate or dedicate an object or person (including one’s self to divinity. In the New Testament this sense is limited to the activity of God and Jesus. Thus in John 7:17 Jesus prays for God to “sanctify” the disciples through the truth. Since this is a verb expressing effort, it is probably best seen as an effective aorist. This use of the aorist stresses fulfillment. It need not however imply crisis-fulfillment, for no implication as to the precedents of the fulfillment is made.<sup>38</sup> Jesus’ use of the aorist shows that He believes the request can reach a stage of fulfillment, though not necessarily in an instantaneous act. The same meaning is probably found in 1 Thessalonians 5:23, where Paul prays for God to “sanctify” the Thessalonians completely. Especially when viewed in its eschatological context which is very evident here, Paul is referring primarily to the actuality of this being fulfilled. The question, of course, is whether he is here using a parallelism with the next statement, thus making “final glorification” (the second aspect of holiness given above) the meaning of “sanctify.” However this is decided, Paul’s assumption of the possibility of fulfillment cannot be denied.

The second main sense in which *hagiazō* can be used is the passive one. This is the sense used when it is applied to men. In this sense it means primarily to be in a state of holiness.<sup>39</sup> As such, the aorist form is best seen as stressing the ingressive aspect. Thus, in John 17:19 when Jesus says that His followers might be sanctified, the emphasis seems to be that they might enter the state of being holy. Again, one can maintain the actuality of the entry from the use of the aorist tense, but he cannot insist that it was a crisis entry. Indeed, in this particular passage the concern appears to center on the present actuality with no reflection on the precedents, as is suggested by the usage of a present punctiliar periphrastic form of the verb. The question that now arises is what type of holiness is referred to here. Kittel<sup>40</sup> expresses the opinion of most exegetes that it is primarily the positional holiness of salvation brought

about by relationship to Jesus (see 17–23). He bases this on the uses of *hagiazō* in Hebrews, where this meaning is evident. However, I would point out that this verb can have a fuller meaning than that, as is evidenced in Revelation 22:11 where the holy encouraged to continue being holy (*hagiastheto*) or in 1 Peter 1:15 where Peter encourages the ones called by Him who is holy (*hagion*) to become holy (*genethetic hagioi*) in all conduct.<sup>41</sup> Given this meaning, the passive uses of *hagiazō* in the aorist tense could suggest not only the actualized entrance into a state of dedication to the Divine, but also growth in conformity to that Divinity. Indeed, this fullness of meaning in the verb tends to enlarge its aoristic usage into that of a constative which could view the entrance, growth, and even the culmination of that growth as a whole without singling out any part for emphasis. I would maintain that this meaning is found at least in Ephesians 5:26.

Another important Word in holiness exegesis is *katharizo*, when it is used in a moral sense. This term means to cleanse or make pure and thus is a verb expressing effort. As such, it should be understood as an effective aorist on analogy with the active use of *hagiazō*. Such an analogy is strongly suggested by Ephesians 5:26 where the two words are used in apposition. Given this interpretation, Acts 15:9 would refer to the completed nature of the purification of the hearts of Cornelius and his companions. And, the context of Acts 10:44-48 would suggest that it was arrived at in a momentary event. Regarding the nature of the fourth aspect of holiness, however, this passage is of little help for it most likely refers to the purification of justification.<sup>42</sup> The use of *katharizo* in Ephesians 5:26 is analogous to that of Acts 15:9.

The only other use of *katharizo* which demands investigation is that in 2 Corinthians 7:1 where Paul exhorts the Corinthians to purify themselves from all defilement of the flesh.” I take this to be a definite example of a constative aorist because of the context. In the first place, the word for defilement (*molusmos*) refers primary to impurities relating to association with idols.<sup>43</sup> Also, there is the parallel use of the present participle *epitelountes* which suggests a continuing activity. Thus, the command is a summary of the previous section where Paul has shown the incompatibility of Christians associating with idols.<sup>44</sup> The Corinthian Christians are told to constantly avoid participation in the pagan rituals. The verb no doubt implies the beginning of that avoidance, but its emphasis is on the whole process that is involved.

For the remainder of the passages which I will consider, the verbs utilized vary in meaning, so I will arrange my discussion by presenting the verse representing inceptive, effective and constative emphases, in that order.

Probably the best example of an inceptive aorist is found in Romans 12:1 where Paul beseeches his listeners to “present” (*parastesai*) their bodies as a living holy sacrifice to God. Since the verb denotes the state of standing alongside of or in the presence of something, the emphasis expressed by the aorist is the entrance into that state. However, it is understood that such an entrance will carry with it a continuing lifestyle. This was shown explicitly when this theme was presented earlier in Romans 6:19. In this verse Paul had told the Roman Christians to present (aorist)

themselves as servants to righteousness in the same way they had presented (aorist) themselves as servants to uncleanness. That a continuing state of existence is the point of this “presentation” is shown in verse 22 when Paul says that the result (*karpos*) of this servanthship to God will be sanctification (*hagiasmos*) or, as Kittel defines it, the sanctifying lifestyle.<sup>45</sup> Thus, the command to present oneself to God is a command to enter decisively into a relationship with God which is then characterized by a holy lifestyle. The use of the inceptive aorist shows that the completeness and actuality of such an entrance are assumed as being possible. While the aorist itself does not guarantee that this entrance is understood as crisis in nature, the context of the aorist participles in 6:22 and the striking contrast between the present and aorist imperatives in the parallel verse 6:13 lead even Moulton to see this verse as expressing the “once-for-all surrender to God.”<sup>46</sup>

Galatians 5:24 presents an example of the effective aorist when Paul says that those who are of Christ have crucified (*estausosan*) the flesh with its passions and lusts. Since this verb is primarily a verb of effort, an effective aorist would be expected. The context helps confirm this, for Paul’s point is that an end has been reached to the old lifestyle. Thus, the use of the aorist here signifies the culmination of a process (probably of a significant period of time due to the meaning of the word and in light of the list of those things which are given up, 5:19–21). The emphasis is that no matter how long it may have taken, this process has reached its goal—in this life. From this point the Christian carries on a lifestyle characterized by the fruits of the Spirit. Again, the emphasis is on completeness, not necessarily crisis action. Of course, one could talk of crisis in terms of a necessary final point in the process of “crucifying”—a use of the term congenial to Wesley but not as strong as what some holiness advocates would claim.

Another obvious example of an effective aorist is 1 Thessalonians 3:13 where Paul speaks of the Thessalonians being established (*sterizai*) in holiness at the Parousia. It is important to note that the term “holiness” (*hagiosune*) used here speaks of an absolute quality, not a character of lifestyle (as in Romans 6:22).<sup>47</sup> Most likely, Paul is referring to the eschatological holiness which will characterize all who stand in the immediate presence (*emprosthen*) of God. The culmination implied in the aorist is not one reached in this life but rather at the Parousia. However, there is a very important exegetical note to make here. This holiness is the result (note the use of *eis* with the infinitive) of a lifestyle characterized by an increasing love for others (v. 12). Thus, the holiness of glorification is linked directly to one’s present lifestyle (for other effective aorists, see Gal. 4:19 and Eph. 4:13).

Turning to the constative aorist, we enter the realm where most of the aorist verbs of the New Testament should be classified. It will be remembered that in this usage the action of the verb is viewed as a whole without distinguishing any part as more important. As such, this usage may refer to a single crisis action or to a prolonged or repeated action which is viewed as a whole. The decision as to which is dependent on the meaning of the verb and the context. An example of a constative aorist that probably refers to a “crisis” action is 2 Corinthians 1:22, where Paul speaks of the one who “sealed” us



(*sphragisamenos*). Both the meaning of the word and the context (for example, the use of *arrabona* “first installment”) suggest this refers to a decisive moment, namely, the time of the baptism in the Holy Spirit. The use of *chrisaz* in the parallelism of the previous verse would further support this interpretation.

Probably more important are the many examples where the “fuller” usage of the constative aorist is present. For example, in Colossians 1:9 we find Paul praying that the Colossians be filled (*plerothete*) with the recognition of Christ’s will in all wisdom and walk (*peripatesai*) in a manner worthy of the Lord. Both the meaning of these verbs and the context which spells out all that is involved in walking in a worthy manner suggest strongly that the action of the verb is not conceived of as taking place instantaneously. Rather, it is the product of a growing relationship with God through Christ. The significance of the aorist is that it can summarize the entire activity in its simplest form. To interpret it as referring only to the initiatory aspect of that relationship, as many holiness advocates have been prone to do, robs it of much of its rich meaning and also can turn it into an unrealistic standard, suggesting that the maturity implied in the superlative adjectives is achieved instantaneously.

One more example of a constative aorist will be sufficient to illustrate its significance. In Romans 13:14 Paul exhorts the Roman Christians to “clothe themselves” (*endusasthe*) with the Lord Jesus Christ. While the meaning of the word could support either an instantaneous or a continuing activity, the context strongly suggests seeing this as a pleonistic constative usage. In the beginning of Chapter 12 Paul had encouraged the Romans to enter a relationship with Christ that would produce a new lifestyle as we saw above. Then he went on to give a list of positive and negative admonitions as to the character of this lifestyle. In our present verse he is summarizing by encouraging the Romans to embrace these characteristics in their daily lives and to “stop making provision for the lusts of the flesh” (see below in reference to this phrase). The meaning of “clothe yourselves” is to embrace the life of “walking in the daylight” (*peripatesomen*, v. 13). The aorist used here is to view that entire process as a whole, including both its initiation and its daily enactment. (For other constatives, see Eph. 4:22–24, Titus 2:14 and Col. 3:12).

The special usage of aorist participles in the predicate position to show simultaneous action is of extreme importance to holiness exegesis. One of the key verses cited to show that the coming of the Holy Spirit (and with it holiness of life) was subsequent to justification is Acts 19:2, where Paul asks some disciples of John if they received the Holy Spirit “after” they believed (*pisteusantes*). However, this could also be rendered “when you believed” as we have seen above. To insist on the idea of subsequent action based only on the aorist exceeds the evidence. The decision can be made finally only in light of an understanding of the normal New Testament “order of salvation,” which is a matter of debate at present. (Similar analyses would be in order for Eph. 1:13 and Eph. 5:26).

The final aspect to be investigated in this paper is the use of prohibitions. Actually, I am not so much concerned with the aorist prohibition as with the present. However, since their significance is defined in contrast to one another, the investigation is justified. Also, the importance to holiness

exegesis makes this point crucial. Primarily, the question is whether certain present prohibitions in Paul really mean to cease an activity presently in progress. As we have seen, Paul is the main New Testament author concerning whom this is a matter of question.

One of the prohibitions in question is Romans 13:14. Is Paul here telling the Romans to “stop making provision for the lusts of the flesh,” or rather “to continue not making provision for the lusts of the flesh?” While the second meaning is possible, it should not be considered probable—particularly in light of the detailed list of ethical mandates immediately preceding this Verse and the repeated emphasis on the need for proper behavior in the Christian life. One is forced to believe that there must be some misconduct sparking this response. The problem this raises for holiness exegesis is that this letter is addressed to the “saints” (*hagiois*) in Rome (1:7). If one assumes this means those who are “entirely sanctified,” then how could they be sinning? The usual solution is to see the term “saints” as referring to positional holiness and to see Paul here exhorting the Roman Christians to the deeper commitment of entire holiness. However, one could also see it as an encouragement to avail oneself of a grace already potentially present in his life without suggesting any new gift of grace is necessary. The main point is to take the command seriously.

This problem is even sharper in Colossians 3:9 where the people addressed are not only called saints but are also said to have been filled (or fulfilled, *pepleromenoi*, 2:10) with Christ. These same persons are exhorted to “stop lying to one another” since they have put off the old man with his practices and put on the new man. The context renders this example incapable of being anything but a negative command. Thus one is left with no alternative but seeing that those who have made the initial entrance into the new life with Christ and have put off the old life with its practices still have need of improvement and of encouragement to act like the chosen people they are (v. 12).

### Conclusion

Finally we are prepared to answer our initial question, “What is the significance of the aorist tense for holiness exegesis?” The first thing that should be repeated is that it cannot be used in and of itself to prove that an action was of a crisis nature. While the presence of the aorist makes such an interpretation possible, it becomes probable only when the meaning of the verb and the context support it. In our analyses we have seen that there are a few cases where such an interpretation is defensible, but that this is not the primary emphasis in the majority of cases. This should not be construed, however, as meaning that the presence of the aorist tense is insignificant. It does carry a strong implication of completeness, especially in the ingressive and effective aorists, and this is one of the major points of holiness doctrine that its advocates are seeking to defend—its availability in this life in some form. We should not let a realization of the falseness of one implication of the aorist tense blind us to the other true implications.

Equally important is the understanding of the primary meaning and the widespread use of the constative aorist. The practice of interpreting the majority of aorists as crisis aorists robs them of much of their meaning. When Paul tells the Ephesians to take off the old man, be renewed in the

spirit of their minds, and put on the new man from God (Eph. 4:22–24), he is commanding more than just a moment of commitment and cleansing. He is prescribing an entire lifetime characterized by denial of the past and empowerment in the present through God’s renewing presence. The command includes the initial commitment, however that may have been arrived at, but it goes much further and portrays the entire range of expressions of that commitment in the disciple’s life. To be sure, all of these emphases are not spelled out explicitly in the aorist, but the use of the constative aorist shows that one is to include all that is involved in the meaning of the verb, whatever that is determined to be.

Thus, a proper understanding of the aorist tense can be very instrumental in helping to find a balance in the present debate between the crisis and the process of sanctification in holiness thought. Instead of being the weapon of only one side, it is really the vehicle of both. Or, more accurately, it shows that the distinctions between crisis and process are not arrived at or defended on the basis of grammar but rather on the basis of thorough theological exegesis and psychological analysis. The assumption that the writers of the New Testament used a grammatical device like the aorist tense in such a specialized sense to reflect a subtle psychological and theological distinction that was really only made within the last two centuries is absurd. We should not try to read our theological refinements back into the text, but rather seek to understand the import of the text as it stands and then make sure that our distinctions are amenable to that import.

In closing, I would say that this understanding of the aorist tense should in no way be seen as lessening its importance in holiness exegesis. If anything, it increases this importance by the removal of many false restrictions on the meaning of certain texts. Responsible exegesis must still take the aorist into consideration, for it does carry with it some important implications. All I have argued is that the implication commonly assumed by holiness advocates is not the only or even the most common of these implications.<sup>48</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>W. T. Purkiser, *Conflicting Concepts of Holiness* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1953), 34.

<sup>2</sup>H. Orton Wiley, *Christian Theology*, 3 vols. (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1940), 2:447.

<sup>3</sup>Richard Howard, *Newness of Life* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1975), 170.

<sup>4</sup>See Charles E. Brown, *The Meaning of Sanctification* (Anderson, IN: Warner Press 1945).

<sup>5</sup>Purkiser refers to W. H. Davies; Howard refers to C. F. D. Moule and Blass & DeBrunner.

- <sup>6</sup>Indeed, Brown, *Meaning of Sanctification*, quotes the whole chapter.
- <sup>7</sup>Olive Winchester, *Crisis Experiences in the Greek New Testament* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1953).
- <sup>8</sup>William W. Goodwin, *A Greek Grammar* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1894).
- <sup>9</sup>Goodwin, *Grammar*, 54.
- <sup>10</sup>Daniel Steele, *Mile-Stone Papers* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1876), 66.
- <sup>11</sup>Goodwin, *Grammar*, 270.
- <sup>12</sup>Winchester, *Crisis Experiences*, 27.
- <sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 29.
- <sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup>A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), 833.
- <sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 829ff.
- <sup>17</sup>I drew on the following sources (which are listed somewhat in order of importance): Robertson, *Grammar*, 823–90; John Hope Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1908), 1:109–35; Nigel Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1963), 3:68–80; Ernest DeWitt Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1976), 16–31, 59–70; C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge: University Press, 1953), 5–20; Friedrich Blass & Albert DeBrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 171ff.
- <sup>18</sup>Robertson, *Grammar*, p. 823.
- <sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 824.
- <sup>20</sup>Turner, *Grammar*, 3:59.
- <sup>21</sup>Robertson, *Grammar*, 830.
- <sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 831.
- <sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 306.
- <sup>24</sup>Moulton, *Grammar* (1909), 1:109.
- <sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:130, footnote.
- <sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:115ff.
- <sup>27</sup>Robertson, *Grammar*, 831ff.
- <sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 847.
- <sup>29</sup>Burton, *Syntax*, 17.
- <sup>30</sup>Moulton, *Grammar*, 1:115ff. See also Robertson, *Grammar*, 828.

- <sup>31</sup>Moulton, *Grammar*, 1:115–18.
- <sup>32</sup>Robertson, *Grammar*, 860ff.; Moulton, *Grammar*, 1:131; see also Burton, *Syntax*, 132ff.
- <sup>33</sup>Robertson, *Grammar*, 852; Moulton, *Grammar*, 1:122-23.
- <sup>34</sup>Robertson, *Grammar*, 854; Moulton, *Grammar*, 1:124.
- <sup>35</sup>Quoted in Robertson, *Grammar*, 854.
- <sup>36</sup>George Allen Turner, *Christian Holiness* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1977), 15–18.
- <sup>37</sup>For more on this distinction, see Purkiser, *Conflicting Concepts*.
- <sup>38</sup>Review Robertson’s distinctions, *Grammar*, 829ff.
- <sup>39</sup>Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), 1:111–12. Hereafter referred to as *TDNT*.
- <sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>41</sup>On this distinction, see Howard’s thesis in *Newness of Life*, 134ff, regarding the relation of the imperative and the indicative in Paul.
- <sup>42</sup>F. J. Foakes and Kirsopp Lake, eds., *The Beginnings of Christianity*, 5 vols. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1942), 1:337ff.
- <sup>43</sup>*TDNT*, 4:736.
- <sup>44</sup>Philip Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), 257.
- <sup>45</sup>*TDNT*, 1:113.
- <sup>46</sup>Moulton, *Grammar*, 1:113. I am indebted to Dr. Alex Deasley for this reference.
- <sup>47</sup>*TDNT*, 1:114.
- <sup>48</sup>For an intriguing article that shows how the aorist tense has been inappropriately used by such leading New Testament scholars as Jeremias, Leon Morris, and R. Schnackenberg, see Frank Stagg, “The Abused Aorist,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91(1972): 222–31.