

Progressive Sanctification: A Divine Co-op

Who lives your Christian life, you or God? That may sound like a trick question but it really is not. It is a question to help the believer reckon clearly and biblically with one of the most pertinent and foundational doctrines of the Christian life. Sanctification is a doctrine that is clearly different from justification¹, though the two are inextricably linked together—one is not present without the other. While justification is an instantaneous declaration by God, sanctification is the ongoing work demonstrating that initial work of grace. So this article seeks to parcel out how much effort is involved on the part of the believer, and in what part God is involved.

Discussions about monergistic²(God working) or synergistic (man cooperating with God) salvation are not helpful here because it is not the same issue. The use of such terms to try to describe our participation in sanctification only muddies the waters. Justification is accomplished solely by God: man plays no part in it. While sanctification is equally a work of God, we are expected and commanded to participate in it; yet we can only engage in it because of God's previous work of justification. Since the main issue is our trying to understand our role in the process, let us consider that particular dynamic.

We hold to the mystery that God has commanded true converts to grow in holiness, yet we admit that there is also a supernatural component to any conformity to Christ, which takes place in this life.

This mystery is like many other paradoxes (seeming contradictions) in Scripture.³ While Scripture never contradicts itself but remains consistent with its teachings, there are some truths that are beyond our comprehension.

Thus, in the paradox of progressive sanctification, the believer is commanded to “work out your salvation” (that’s the imperative responsibility to engage oneself), knowing concurrently that “it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Phil 2:13-14).

¹ “Comes from a Greek concept meaning ‘to declare righteous.’ It is a legal act wherein God pronounces that the believing sinner has been credited with all the virtues of Jesus Christ. Whereas forgiveness is the negative aspect of salvation meaning the subtraction of human sin, justification is the positive aspect meaning the addition of divine righteousness.” (Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, 639).

² Monergistic simply refers to “one working.” This is the reformed teaching of God initiating new life into a dead soul. Since man is totally depraved, with no ability to regenerate himself, regeneration is solely the work of our sovereign God. Synergistic, on the other hand, teaches that man cooperates with God. For a helpful discussion on this distinction, see R. C. Sproul’s *What is Reformed Theology?* (Baker Books, 2012), 183-87.

³ For instance, did God write the Bible or man (see 2 Tim 3:16; Rom 16:22)? Can all come to Christ or only those whom the Son chooses (see Matt 11:28, 27)? Why pray if God has already determined the outcome of everything (see Lk 18:1; Isa 46:10)? And while *man* is held responsible to receive Christ, when people become children of God, it is said that this reception is *of God* (Jn 1:12-13).

Remember, this is not a call to performance-based theology. We do not work ourselves into God's favor and could never work enough to remain in His favor. His Son is the One in whom He is well-pleased. Milton Vincent adds a refreshing, Gospel-centered reminder:

The gospel encourages me to rest in my righteous standing with God, a standing which Christ Himself has accomplished and always maintains for me (Rom 5:1-2; 1 Jn 2:1-2). I never have to do a moment's labor to gain or maintain my justified status before God (Rom 4:5; Heb 4:3; Matt 11:28). The gospel also reminds me that my righteous standing with God always holds firm regardless of my performance, because my standing is based solely on the work of Jesus and not mine (Rom 5:18-19). On my worst days of sin and failure, the gospel encourages me with God's unrelenting grace towards me (Rom 5:20-21; 6:1; 1 Jn 2:1-2). On my best days of victory and usefulness, the gospel keeps me relating to God solely on the basis of Jesus' righteousness and not mine.

The righteousness of God, credited to me through Christ, is not merely something I rest in, but is also the premier saving reality by which God governs me. According to Romans 6, when I obeyed the gospel call I was both declared righteous and "became a slave of righteousness" at the same time (Rom 6:17-18). Quite literally, the righteousness that God credited to me became my master on the day I was converted! And now I am daily called by God to surrender the members of my being as slaves to do whatever this righteousness dictates (Rom 6:19).⁴

Notice that the imperative (to obey) is based upon the indicative (the state of reality).⁵ God is at work in the lives of those who have been born again, but it is not apart from willing submission, subjection, obedience, and active pursuit. Sanctification is accomplished through the active discipline of the Christian while trusting the Holy Spirit to keep him in obedience and conformity to Christ (Rom 6:15-22).⁶ Believers are exhorted to do in practice what has already been done in principle. So progressive sanctification is the continuing work that God Himself began at the instantaneous one-time event that occurred at the moment of salvation, but in this aspect God and man cooperate, each playing distinct roles.⁷

⁴ Milton Vincent, *A Gospel Primer*, (Focus Publishing, 2008), 20-21.

⁵ For an edifying study of this dynamic see George Zemek, *A Biblical Theology of the Doctrines of Sovereign Grace* (Wipf & Stock, 2002), 215-19.

⁶ This is just one of many NT passages in which God's commands to believers are also accompanied by His enablement through the Spirit (2 Pet 3:18; 2 Cor 7:1; Heb 12:14; 1 Pet 2:11; Rom 8:13; 13:14; Eph 5:18). Furthermore, mirroring God's holy character is not a requirement unique to this age. He also required it of Israel (Lev. 11:44; cf. 19:2; 20:7-8, 28).

⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, (Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 746.

This active pursuit of the disciplined Christian life—one that lives in conformity to God’s Word—has another dimension to consider. It includes not only the positive “put-ons” in habits of righteousness but also the “putting-off” of sin (see Eph 4:22-24.⁸ Herein is briefly stated the biblical process of change. Though it is clear what God requires, it is also a difficult struggle. It is a fight to the death; a war if you will (Gal 5:16-17). It is a constant struggle that will consistently characterize the Christian until sin is done away with and we are with our Lord.

One of many errors which come from ignorance of this struggle and which must be avoided is perfectionism. This misnomer came from John Wesley and John Fletcher and manifests itself in Methodism, Nazarenes, the Salvation Army, and the Holiness Movement. It is a view that holds that one can place his faith in Christ as Savior and live a non-sanctified life until he experiences some “second work of grace” which propels him into a state of sinless perfection. Yet, this is only once he totally surrenders to the Lord. Notice their disconnect between sanctification and justification. They teach that at the point of “rededication of life”, a sort of “2nd blessing”, the Christian reaches a point where he does not willfully sin⁹ against God (citing Matt 5:48; 6:13; Jn 3:8 for support). It is here that the struggle between good and evil ceases.¹⁰ Against this unbiblical idea of an unsanctified life was the inimitable Princeton professor B.B. Warfield who countered with:

The whole sixth chapter of Romans...was written for no other purpose than to assert and demonstrate that justification and sanctification are indissolubly bound together; that we cannot have one without having the other; that, to use its own figurative language, dying with Christ and living with Christ are integral elements in one indisintegrable salvation. To wrest these two things apart and make separable gifts of grace of them evinces a confusion in the conception of Christ’s salvation which is nothing less than portentous. It forces from us the astonished cry, Is Christ divided? And it compels us to point afresh to the primary truth that we do not obtain the benefits of Christ apart

⁸ For a helpful resource on this biblical practice, see Armand Tiffe’s *Transformed Into His Likeness*, (Focus Publishing, 2005).

⁹ It is important to define “willful” on God’s terms and not ours. For instance, the writer to the Hebrews mentions this in 10:26. A believer might know what he is about to do when he acknowledges in his heart he is about to give way to temptation and does it anyway. That is not what is warned against. The apostasy that the writer warns of here and in the other warning passages of Hebrews is a knowing, habitual repudiation of the truth. The sin written of, and connected to the previous exhortations, and written in the present tense, is not the *act* of sin or any number of acts that could be repented of and blotted from their record, but the *state* of sin. He is talking of an unbroken pattern of sin, not acts of sin punctuated by repentance. It is not merely deliberate, but an established way of life, a permanent renunciation of the Gospel and continual rejection of God’s grace.

¹⁰ Melvin Dieter, *Five Views on Sanctification* (Zondervan, 1987), 17.

from, but only in and with His Person; and that when we have Him we have all.¹¹

A similar nuance is the Keswick or Deeper Life movement, which has been promoted by Hannah Smith, Andrew Murray, and Watchman Nee. It gives the probability of a Christian living a defeated life until he learns to consecrate his life and “let go and let God” handle the issue of sanctification. At that point, he will experience the victorious Christian life.

Unfortunately, both skewed views fail to recognize that sanctification is inextricably linked to the moment of justification. They also fail to recognize sanctification as *progressive* growth and working out the fruit of a redeemed life until life in the body is ended. It is part and parcel of salvation unto good works (Eph 2:10). This false doctrine of perfectionism stands in direct contradiction to such passages as Philippians 3:12-16 and 1 John 1:8, to name just a couple. Perfection in this life is merely a goal but never an achievement. Though we wrestle and strive in this life, the prize is only attained in Glory (Phil 3:12, 14). The battle against sin and our own wicked hearts (Jer 17:9) is only won and ceased when we are conformed unto His likeness (Col 1:28; Rom 8:29; Phil 1:6).

There must be a recognition that while God calls sinful men and makes them holy saints through grace (this becoming their new state in life; holy ones; set apart; positional sanctification—Col 3:12; Heb 3:1), they are responsible to shun uncleanness and manifest their sanctified state progressively (Jn 17:17; Heb 2:11; 10:14).

Sanctification is positional before it ever becomes progressive (1 Cor 6:11; Phil 1:6). Thus, when discussing the issue of sanctification, one must think clearly of which stage or aspect is being spoken of; positional, experiential (which is progressive throughout life), or ultimate.¹² Sanctification is begun at salvation and is solely the work of God. It progresses throughout the life of the believer and is never completed until the end of life. As Millard Erickson so aptly puts it, it is:

The continuing work of God in the life of the believer... Sanctification is a process by which one's moral condition is brought into conformity with one's legal status before God... It designates not merely the fact that believers are formally set apart, or belong to Christ, but that they are then to conduct themselves accordingly. They are to live lives of purity and goodness.¹³

Yes, sins are forgiven and God lavishes his grace upon those whom He sets free. But freedom cannot become an excuse for sin. That is Paul's whole point in Romans 6-8. The believer is dead to sin and alive to God, yet there is conflict between what he desires to do and what he constantly does. He loves the Lord and

¹¹ Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, (Baker Book House, 2000), viii: 568-69.

¹² See Peter Enns, 329-30 and/or Grudem, 747-753.

¹³ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, (Baker Books, 2002), 967-969.

hates sin but still indulges in it. In fact, when he does sin and does not pursue righteousness, he is at odds with that contradiction, that his practice does not back up his position. He cannot feel at home with sin nor have a clean conscience when he fails to pursue spiritual disciplines, gospel graces, and Christian virtues. Though free, he is in “bondage” to serve his new master, the Lord Jesus Christ. And that is his joy and passion. He is compelled to honor his Savior. This is a sense of owing Him who set us free from the curse of the law. It is an obligation, an internal compulsion of what we ought to do. Disciplining ourselves unto godliness is the “ought” of the Good News that not only frees us from sin’s penalty, but also empowers us to obey out of love for our Redeemer. There is an aggression and active pursuit of godliness. The Puritans called in “holy sweat.” Unfortunately, too many Christians have not been well-equipped in discipleship and biblical counseling toward how to apply the biblical process of change to their lives.

In practice, Christians act like they believe the Wesleyan and Keswick views. They constantly await the “holy zap” to take away the strong impulses of sin and to eliminate the need for concentrated self-discipline. Many do not even practice the spiritual discipline of confession of sin. At best, this passivity fails to put into practice the Word (Jas 1:22) and at the worst, it is disobedience to the clear commands to the contrary (Ps 32; Matt 6:12). Calvin, in his 2 Peter commentary, stated:

It is an *arduous work* and of *immense labour*, to put off the corruption which is in us, he bids us to *strive* and make every effort for this purpose. He intimates that no place is to be given in this case to sloth, and that we ought to obey God calling us, not slowly or carelessly, but that there is need of alacrity; as though he had said, ‘Put forth every effort, and make your exertions manifest to all.’¹⁴

Those who disregard obligation toward holiness and a life of obedience abuse their Christian liberty and pursue a lawless lifestyle. While flaunting their freedom in Christ, they claim that they are not obligated to the law of God because of grace. To refute such flagrant violation of liberty and the lack of understanding of law and grace, Luther reminded believers of his day:

We, too, who are now made holy through grace, nevertheless live in a sinful body. And because of this remaining sin, we must permit ourselves to be rebuked, terrified, slain, and sacrificed by the Law until we are lowered into the grave. Therefore before and after we have become Christians, the Law must in this life constantly be the slaying, condemning, accusing Law.¹⁵

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, (Baker Books, 1999), xxii: 372.

¹⁵ As cited in Steve Lawson’s *A Long Line of Godly Men Profile: The Heroic Boldness of Martin Luther*, (Reformation Trust, 213), 71.

Perhaps one of Luther's most famous phrases gives insight into the Reformed¹⁶ view of sanctification. The Latin phrase speaks to the issue of not perfectly practicing what God has declared us to be in position; it was *simul justus et peccator*. That little phrase simply means "at the same time, just (or righteous) and sinner." God does not eradicate all sin in the life of a believer, but He does declare the repentant sinner righteous. Though still a sinner, he is declared by the Judge of Heaven righteous. Through faith in Christ the sinner is robed by God in Christ's righteousness (2 Cor 5:21). The righteousness of the sinless One is transferred to the guilty. This is the righteousness which comes by faith. As a legal declaration by God, this is what is called forensic (related to the idea of acquittal).¹⁷

Many go to one extreme or another. There is typically either an overemphasis on law, leaning towards legalism, or an overemphasis on liberty, leading to license. We should, however, pursue a biblical balance that recognizes both aspects of law and grace working together while being informed that the Christian life will always involve struggle and conflict with sin. The way may at times, though, get easier as we learn the biblical process of change and as we learn to mortify sin and put it to death. That does *not* mean sin is done away with. The enemy within, though mortally wounded as a defeated foe and put to death in principle (Rom 6:6), still needs to be regularly and aggressively put to death in daily practice (Gal 6:24) and laid aside (Eph 4:22).

Never think for a minute that the war against sin is over in this life. There isn't even a cease-fire. Many generals have been surprised because they were careless after a victory. Countless believers have been ambushed on the heels

¹⁶ Chapter 13 of Westminster Confession of Faith states: "1. They who are effectually called and regenerated, having a new heart and a new spirit created in them, are further sanctified, really and personally, through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, by His Word and Spirit dwelling in them; the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed, and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified, and they more and more quickened and strengthened, in all saving graces, to the practice of true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord. 2. This sanctification is throughout in the whole man, yet imperfect in this life: there abideth still some remnants of corruption in every part, whence ariseth a continual and irreconcilable war, the flesh lusting against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh. 3. In which war, although the remaining corruption for a time may much prevail, yet, through the continual supply of strength from the sanctifying Spirit of Christ, the regenerate part doth overcome: and so the saints grow in grace, perfecting holiness in the fear of God." *The Reformation Study Bible* (2015), 2440.

¹⁷ Justification cannot be understood in any other sense than forensic. The usage set forth is a judicial process (Job 9:3; Ps 143:2; Rom 3:28; 4:1-3; Acts 13:39). The law accuses the guilty, those deserving the sentence of punishment, yet are bestowed a verdict of absolution by the Judge. The gracious God declares them righteousness, not on their own account, but by the imputed righteousness of His own beloved Son. Further explanation can be found in Charles Hodges's *Systematic Theology*, (Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 3:118-20.

of a giant step forward in faith. David, for example, lived a long life of devotion and duty to God, and saw mercy on mercy from God's hands; then sin tip-toed up behind him in the dark and stabbed him in the back.

If you violently war against your flesh, you'll win ground. It will grow weak, and you'll grow in grace into the image of Christ. Still, the work has to be endless as long as we're in this world. If you cut the flesh any slack, you'll watch it regroup and revive. You may even end up worse off than you were before (compare Lk 11:24-26).¹⁸

This familiar struggle that the Christian experiences is written of by Paul in Romans 7¹⁹ and addressed by the Princeton and Westminster theologian, John Murray:

If there is still sin to any degree by one who is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, then there is tension, yes, contradiction, within the heart of that person. Indeed, the more sanctified the person is, the more conformed he is to the image of his Savior, the more he must recoil against every lack of conformity to the holiness of God. The deeper his apprehension of the majesty of God, the greater the intensity of his love to God, the more persistent his yearning for the attainment of the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus, the more conscious will he be of the gravity of the sin which remains and the more poignant will be his detestation of it. The more closely he comes to the holiest of all, the more he apprehends the sinfulness that is his and he must cry out, "O wretched man that I am" (Rom 7:24)... Truly biblical sanctification has not affinity with the self-complacency which ignores or fails to take into account the sinfulness of every lack of conformity to the image of him who was holy, harmless, and undefiled. "Ye shall be perfect therefore as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5:48)... There must be a constant and increasing appreciation that though sin still remains it does not have the mastery. There is a total difference between surviving sin and reigning sin, the regenerate in conflict with sin and the unregenerate complacent in sin. It is one thing for sin to live in us: it is another for us to live in sin. It is one thing for the enemy to occupy the capital; it is another for his defeated hosts to harass the garrisons of the kingdom. It is of paramount concern for the Christian and for the interests of his sanctification that he should know that sin does not have the dominion over him, that the forces of redeeming, regenerative, and sanctifying grace have been brought to bear upon him in that which is central in his moral and spiritual being, that he is

¹⁸ Kris Lundgaard, *The Enemy Within*, (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1998), 39-40.

¹⁹ For a brief study on how this must have been Paul as a mature believer and not an unbeliever, see my explanation in "Romans 7 and Paul's Struggle." It can be accessed at www.biblicalexpositor.org.

the habitation of God through the Spirit, and that Christ has been formed in him the hope of glory.²⁰

Christian, you are a contradiction. Though God has justified and declared you righteous, you still commit sins. That, beloved, is the constant contradiction that all the saints live until they are glorified. How about you? Are you killing sin? As John Owen was noted as saying, “you must be killing sin or it will be killing you.”

Puritan J.C. Ryle gives a good summary of this issue of progressive sanctification in stating:

He that is born again and made a new creature receives a new nature and a new principle, and always lives a new life... In a word, where there is no sanctification there is no regeneration, and where there is no holy life there is no new birth.²¹

He gives a specific portrait of what traits are visibly demonstrated in the life that is being sanctified as the believer exerts himself in submission to the Spirit of God. The first half is given by negation and the second half is given in the affirmative:

It is not talk about religion, religious feelings, outward formalism and external devoutness, retirement from our place in life, occasional performance of right actions; but it is habitual respect to God’s law, and habitual effort to live in obedience to it as a rule of life, an habitual endeavor [sic] to do Christ’s will, an habitual desire to live up the standard which St. Paul sets before the churches in his writings, habitual attention to the active graces which our Lord so beautifully exemplified, and habitual attention to the passive graces of Christianity. “Such are the visible marks of a sanctified man. I do not say that they are to be seen equally in all God’s people. I freely admit that in the best they are not fully and perfectly exhibited. But I do say confidently that the things of which I have been speaking are the spiritual marks of sanctification, and that those who know nothing of them may well doubt whether they have any grace at all. Whatever others may please to say, I will never shrink from saying that genuine sanctification is a thing that can be seen, and that the marks I have endeavored [sic] to sketch out are more or less the marks of a sanctified man.”²²

²⁰ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, (Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 144-46.

²¹ John Charles Ryle, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, & Roots*, (Charles Nolan Publishers, 2001), 21.

²² *Ibid.*, 29-36.

In this pursuit of progressive sanctification I trust you are engaged in the battle. There is no let-up or pause button in the fight against the remaining corruption in our hearts. There should be a sobriety that marks the life of a Christian—not a cavalier attitude but one of perpetual discontent until we are complete in Christ (Col 1:28). Yes, there is wondrous joy in the Lord and peace with Him, but there is simultaneously a constant discontent in our inadequate pursuit of Christ and His likeness. This “discontentedness until Christ is formed in us” was captured well by Warfield in his article, “Miserable-Sinner Christianity”:

It belongs to the very essence of the type of Christianity propagated by the Reformation that the believer should feel himself continuously unworthy of the grace by which he lives. At the center of this type of Christianity lies the contrast of sin and grace; and about this center everything else revolves. This is in large part the meaning of the emphasis put in this type of Christianity on justification by faith. It is its conviction that there is nothing in us or done by us, at any stage of our earthly development, because of which we are acceptable to God. We must always be accepted for Christ’s sake or we cannot ever be accepted at all. This is not true of us only “when we believe.” It is just as true after we have believed. It will continue to be true as long as we live. Our need of Christ does not cease with our believing; nor does the nature of our relation to Him or to God through Him ever alter, no matter what our attainments in Christian graces or our achievements in Christian behavior may be. It is always on His “blood and righteousness” alone that we can rest. There is never anything that we are or have or do that can take His place, or that can take a place along with Him. We are always unworthy, and all that we have or do of good is always of pure grace. Though blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ, we are still in ourselves just “miserable sinners”: “miserable sinners” saved by grace to be sure, but “miserable sinners” still, deserving in ourselves nothing but everlasting wrath. That is the attitude which the Reformers took, and that is the attitude which the Protestant world has learned from the Reformers to take, toward the relation of believers to Christ.²³

This sense of unworthiness, especially that which comes from continued sinfulness in fact and act, ought to motivate believers toward deep brokenness, confession, and repentance. And rather than engage in morbid introspection, learn to embrace in faith and obedience God’s abundant forgiveness through His own beloved Son. Pursue living life with a perpetually clean conscience with your relationship with God and others up-to-date, that there would not be any fertile soil for unbelief and reception of the lies hurled about by the Accuser of the brethren.

²³ Benjamin Warfield, *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, (Baker Book House, 2000), vii:113-14.

Though there is peace and joy in our hearts since we are united with Christ and experience all the blessings that flow out of our redemption, there is also a marked sadness that we are not more like Christ, more advanced in spiritual growth, and more consistently holy in our attitudes, speech, deeds, and desires.

If you have been justified and have begun the pursuit of God-given righteousness,²⁴ then confidently wage war against remaining sin. Put off sin and put on righteousness, motivated by love for Christ, that has been enabled by His substitution, rooted in union with Him, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and appropriated by faith.

This progressive sanctification is a co-op where we work in His strength, exerting ourselves as if it all depends on us, knowing that it all depends of Him. This aspect of sanctification is as much a work of God as justification and positional sanctification, but it is also one in which He demands our maximum pursuit. Professor Berkhof clarified:

When it is said that man takes part in the work of sanctification, this does not mean that man is an independent agent in the work, so as to make it partly the work of God and partly the work of man; but merely, that God effects the work in part through the instrumentality of man as a rational being, by requiring of him prayerful and intelligent co-operation with the Spirit.²⁵

So the next time your sinful desires invite you to rejoin your way of life before knowing Christ, when you used to sin without regret, reply with the Spirit's aid, "I cannot participate, because I am dead... I died to sin and I'm alive to Christ, seated with Him in heavenly places" (Eph 2).

Additional Reading:

Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification, Donald Alexander

A New Call to Holiness, J. Sidlow Baxter

The Pursuit of Holiness, Jerry Bridges

The Mortification of Sin, John Owen

Holiness, J.C. Ryle

Five Views of Sanctification, Stanley Gundry, ed.

Sanctification: The Christian's Pursuit of God-Given Holiness, Michael Riccardi

A Biblical Theology of the Doctrines of Sovereign Grace, George Zemek

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²⁴ The life of the Christian is one in which God recreates sinners via the new birth and faithfully renews them into the image of His Son (1 Pet 1:3ff.; 2 Cor 5:21; Phil 1:6). The Holy Spirit is actively involved in setting them apart from sin and conforming them to Christ's image (2 Cor 3:18; Gal 5:22-23).

²⁵ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, (Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 534.

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