

Introduction to the Aorist Tense and Entire Sanctification:
History, Developments, and Implications

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Just in case it has been sufficiently long ago that some of you studied Greek that precisely what the term “aorist” refers to has been lost, let me give you a quick refresher.

When talking about the past, Greek has four past tenses: the first, called the “**imperfect** tense,” portrays an action as on-going in the past; the second, called the “**perfect** tense,” portrays an action as completed in the past with results that are on-going in the present; the third, called the “**pluperfect** tense,” portrays an action as completed in the past with results that were on-going in the past. The fourth, called the “**aorist** tense,” is “the simple past tense.”¹ If you used, Dana and Mantey, they described the aorist as completing an action “in single perspective, as a point, which we may call *punctiliar* action (Robertson, 823).”²

Probably more important than what you read in your Greek grammar or heard in class, however, have been the holiness writers, commentators, and theologians who have written on this topic. Most likely, what you read there was that the aorist tense presents an action as taking place decisively in a moment.

In 2009, I presented a paper here on the exegesis of 1 Thess. 5:23. In a footnote, I made the following statement:

For those whose NT Greek education was obtained prior to the 1980s, the understanding of the aspectual significance of the aorist tense has undergone significant scholarly scrutiny since then. The consensus of NT Greek scholarship, regardless of theological or non-theological affiliation, is that the aorist tense in itself does not depict an action as completed in a moment of time, but rather presents an action “in summary, viewed as a whole from the outside, without regard for the internal make-up of the [action]” (Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, 97. Cf. also McKay, “Time and Aspect,” 225). Stanley Porter offers a similar definition: “The aorist tense-form occurs in contexts where the use of Greek wishes to depict an action as a complete and undifferentiated process” (Porter, *Idioms*, 35). For an accessible introduction to the discussion and literature, see Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 495-512, and esp. 554-557.

During the Q&A following Bennie Durr, Sr. asked if a paper could be given that would explain what I was talking about.

As a result of Bro. Durr’s question, I collaborated with Stephen Smith, Steve Oliver, and James Sedlacek to address this question.

¹ Machen, *New Testament Greek for Beginners*, p. 82, §168.

² Dana and Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, p. 179, § 170.

We have broken the topic up into what we hope are bite size pieces for two reasons: it relieved us from the necessity of trying to write a dissertation-chapter size paper, and it will hopefully make it more manageable for you if this is your first exposure to these ideas.

The topic naturally fell into five sections:

1. What Greek grammarians said about the aorist in the 19th century.
2. What Daniel Steele said about the aorist tense in relation to sanctification (initial, entire, and progressive)
3. What Greek grammarians said about the aorist from 1900 to 1980 and how Wesleyans made use of that information.
4. What Greek grammarians have said about the aorist tense from 1980 to the present.
5. What are the implications for how we preach and teach the doctrine of entire sanctification.

Our reasons for picking Daniel Steele were several: 1) he appears to have been the first to write extensively about the aorist tense in texts relevant to sanctification,³ and 2) he continued to be widely quoted by holiness theologians and commentators well into the 20th century.

Our intent is to help you walk away after these sessions with a clear set of questions to ask when evaluating the significance any aorist tense verb, whether in the context of sanctification or not.

To that end, we set up the last session as a panel discussion in which we will discuss a set of key texts that address sanctification using the aorist tense.

We have a one-page glossary list that we are providing to you now so that you can look up the meaning of terms that may be used throughout these papers. We have done our best to minimize technical jargon in our papers, but some technical terms were unavoidable.

Each session is set up with a Q & A period after it so that you can gain clarity regarding what was presented. Feel free to ask your questions. If the moderator knows that the question will be answered in one of the following papers, he will probably defer it to that time. But don't hesitate to ask.

Our first essay will be presented by Stephen Smith who joined the GBSC faculty this Fall. I will present the second essay. Steve Olive, who finished his NT PhD this Spring at Bob Jones University, will present the third essay, and James Sedlacek, who has earned his Master of Divinity degree from Cincinnati Christian University will present the fourth essay. The last presentation will be a panel discussion with all four of us participating.

Are there any questions you'd like to ask before we hear from Stephen Smith?

³ Joseph Agar Beet wrote a three-part series on "The Greek Aorist, As Used in the New Testament" which appeared in *The Expositor*, vol. 11, in 1880. It is available only at <http://books.google.com/books?id=3zY2AAAAMAAJ>