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Elmer L. Towns
Liberty University

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Martin Luther On Sanctification

Elmer L. Towns

Martin Luther is well known for preaching justification by faith apart from works. This doctrine became the cornerstone for the reformation. During Luther's day he was accused of antinomianism. Erasmus charged, "Lutherans seek two things only—wealth and wives—*censum et uxorem* . . . to them the gospel meant the right to live as they please."[1] John Wesley accused Luther of distorting the doctrine of sanctification, if Luther had any doctrine of sanctification at all. "Who hath wrote more ably than Martin Luther on justification by faith alone?" Wesley then asked, "And who was more ignorant of the doctrine of sanctification, or more confused in his conception of it?" He then advises us, if we would be thoroughly convinced of Luther's "total ignorance with regard to sanctification" to read "without prejudice" his *Commentary on Galatians*.[2]

This misunderstanding of Luther's concept of sanctification might have arisen because he uses Paul's first-century message of grace as opposed to works to attack legalistic salvation found in the sixteenth-century church. Because of Luther's emphasis on grace and liberty, many might accuse him of a weak concept of sanctification or an antinomian basis for the Christian Life.

Actually, Luther's concept of sanctification is difficult to understand without looking at his doctrine of justification. Both doctrines for Luther are grounded in the Person of God. "But the fact is, that for Luther, justification and sanctification, although distinguishable in theory, are quite inseparable in factors."[3] Luther goes on to state, "Justification and sancti-

[1] Erasmus, *Letter of March 20, 1528, to W. Pirkheimer.*

[2] John Wesley, *Works.* VII. p. 204. (Sermons CVII, 5). As quoted in Philip Watson, *Let God Be God,* p. 187. See Watson's preface to *St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* by Martin Luther, p. 13, for Wesley's context of the above remark.

[3] Philip S. Watson, *op. cit.,* p. 171.

fication are related like cause and effect and from the presence of the effect we may conclude that the cause is at work."[4]

For Luther, justification means that man possesses "a righteousness not his own, *a iustitia externa et aliena,* a righteousness not of works, but of faith."[5] The believer must apprehend Jesus Christ by faith and as Jesus Christ dwells in the life, so true Christian righteousness dwells in the believer for righteousness and gives him eternal life. "Christ apprehended by faith, and *dwelling in the heart,* is the true Christian righteousness, for the which God counteth us righteous and giveth us eternal life."[6]

Man's sin is forgiven, according to Luther, although man does not cease to be a sinner. Even Luther testifies of sin in his own life: "Martin, thou shalt not utterly be without sin, for thou hast yet flesh; thou shalt therefore, feel the battle thereof.[7] Luther goes on to say: "The more godly a man is, the more doth he feel that battle."[8] Therefore, we can properly ask Luther, if a man is justified from sin yet still has sin within him, "What is sanctification?"

I. LUTHER'S CONCEPT OF SANCTIFICATION

The intent of this section is to examine and set forth Luther's concept of sanctification. A working definition we shall attempt to prove is as follows. Sanctification is a continual process of God, based on the finality of justification, where as a result of daily faith the Holy Spirit is operative in the believer's life, which purifies and frees the believer for good works, operating within the community of believers—the church, where the Word and sacraments are present.

1. *Sanctification involves the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in man.* Luther preached that the Holy Spirit indwelt the believer and became the substance and motivation for sanctification. Actually, the Holy Spirit is not pictured as an addition to enable man to become holy. The Holy Spirit is man's positive dynamic for sanctification. Luther indicates of the Holy Spirit, "He makes us holy."[9] In the *Shorter Catechism*

[4] Ewald M. Plass (ed.), *What Luther Says,* p. 723.
[5] Martin Luther, *Works, Kritische Gesamtausgabe,* I, 84.
[6] Martin Luther, *A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians,* ed. Erasmus Middleton, p. 83.
[7] Martin Luther, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians,* p. 504.
[8] *Ibid.,* p. 506.
[9] Martin Luther, *Luther's Primary Works,* p. 101.

Luther indicates: "I believe that I cannot of my own understanding and strength believe in or come to Jesus Christ my Lord, but that the Holy Ghost has called me by the gospel and illuminated me with His gifts, and sanctified me in the faith."[10]

Also, let us not make the mistake thinking Luther taught the Holy Spirit only gives us His gifts in sanctification—love, peace, or joy. The Holy Spirit gives us His person. Luther indicates: "He dwells in believers, not merely as to His gifts, but as to His substance."[11] This indwelling of the Holy Spirit is never actionless in the godly, but is always working something pertaining to the kingdom of God.[12] At another place Luther says: "The purpose of His working is our sanctification, which he accomplishes by applying, so to speak, the redemptive activity of Christ in our Life."[13]

The believer is justified by faith, apart from good works. However, after conversion the believer must perform good works as a "token" of his new nature. At this point, Watson interprets Luther's concept of sanctification in performance of good works. "If he (believer) cannot achieve it by his natural powers, then he must have the necessary love 'infused' by a super-natural operation of grace. In other words, man must be sanctified by some means or other, if he is ever to be justified in the sight of God who is himself holy and just."[14]

2. *Sanctification comes by faith.* As Luther taught that man is justified by God apart from human actions, so he teaches that sanctification is God's work apart from human activity. Man cannot sanctify himself. Only in and through faith can man appropriate the power God has for his sanctification. By faith here Luther obviously does not merely mean holding the orthodox opinions, for even the devil himself holds those; but he means the application quite personally to oneself of the salvation promised by the Word. For Luther states: "If it be true faith, it is a sure trust and confidence of the heart, and a firm consent whereby Christ is apprehended."[15] The application of faith by the believer is

[10] *Shorter Catechism.*
[11] Martin Luther, *Select Works of Martin Luther,* IV, 153.
[12] *Ibid.,* p. 54.
[13] *Primary Works, op. cit.,* p. 101.
[14] Watson, *op. cit.,* p. 53.
[15] *Galatians, op. cit.,* p. 134.

very close to the appropriation of Christ by the believer. If the person of Christ (the object of faith) does not become a reality, there is no faith. For Luther believes that in faith itself, "Christ is present, *in ipsa fide christus adest.*"[16]

3. *Sanctification purifies the believer.* When Christ comes into the heart of a man he does that work which is natural for him to do—to forgive sins. Of this, Luther says: "He dwells in our hearts by such faith and purifies us daily by His own proper work."[17]

The instrument through which this forgiveness is actualized is the Word of God. At this point, Luther ties together the Word of God, the Holy Ghost, and the act of sanctification: "God's Word is holy and sanctifies everything it touches; Nay, it is the very holiness of God. (Moreover) the Holy Ghost Himself administers it and anoints and sanctifies the Church that is, the Christian, holy people with it."[18]

Watson, in a footnote, amplifies Luther's concept of forgiveness, tying it to sanctification. "Melanchthon says for grace 'forgiveness.' Luther says for grace 'forgiveness and sanctification.' "[19]

4. *Sanctification frees the believer to do good works.* Sanctification involves more than cleansing or purifying the human vessel. This cleaning is for a purpose. According to Luther, sanctification equips the believer for Christian service. Luther had indicated, "The indwelling of Christ, redeems us from the bondage of Egypt (sin) makes us free, gives us power to do good."[20] In a striking picture Luther illustrates the believer's ability to perform good works: "Just so no one becomes a bishop by doing the works of a bishop, but after he has been made a bishop, he does the works of a bishop. So the works of faith do not make faith, but faith does the works of faith."[21] Gerrish interprets Luther's freedom: "In Luther's theology the Christian has been freed *from* the necessity to merit salvation and thus freed *for* the opportunity to serve his neighbour (without an eye to self-salvation or self-sanctification)."[22]

[16] *Ibid.*
[17] Luther, *Werke, op. cit.*, p. 160.
[18] *Ibid.*, p. 270.
[19] Watson, *op. cit.*, p. 188.
[20] Luther, *Werke.*
[21] Plass, *op. cit.*, p. 724.
[22] B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Reason, A Study of the Theology of Luther*, p. 135.

5. *Sanctification is a daily process.* There are two aspects of the continuing process of sanctification: (1) a continual struggle with the flesh or old man, and (2) the daily ministry of the Holy Spirit in us. Luther was not deceived with a spurious self-righteousness. He realized that in his body lay fleshly lusts and a sinful nature. "I am a sinner, and I feel sin in me, for I have not yet put off the flesh, in which sin dwelleth so long as it liveth."[23] Because of this, Luther warns other believers to be aware of this battle. "Let no man marvel therefore, or be dismayed, when he feeleth in his body this battle of the flesh against the spirit."[24] Watson speaks of this conflict: "The conflict of the 'flesh' and the spirit, the mortification of the old Adam and the rising of the new Man means nothing else but the struggle between human self-love and Divine in the believer's life."[25] This struggle is a daily process resulting in a lifelong action. "The daily growth in sanctification can only mean the increasing mastery of divine love . . . *who in His grace forgives the selfishness that still remains.*[26]

In addition to the daily struggle with the flesh, Luther taught a daily ministry of the Holy Spirit to enable the believer to withstand the battle and grow in grace. Concerning this, Luther states: The sanctification, once begun, daily increases, (for) the Holy Spirit is continually at work in us, by means of the Word of God, and daily bestowing forgiveness on us, till we reach that life where there is no more forgiveness, all persons there being pure and holy.[27]

6. *Sanctification is not effective apart from the church.* Luther's concept of the church is substantially different than the modern sociological definition that includes organizational patterns and outward manifestations given to describe the local institution.[28] For Luther defines the church as a place where the word and the sacraments were present. "The church

[23] *Galatians, op. cit.,* p. 504.
[24] *Ibid.,* p. 503.
[25] Watson, *op. cit.,* p. 172.
[26] *Ibid.*
[27] *Luther's Primary Works, op. cit.,* p. 104.
[28] David Moberg, *The Church as a Social Institution,* pp. 16-17. Moberg gives possible definitions of Church. 1. A building used for religion worship. 2. A spiritual fellowship or "communion of saints." 3. The invisible, incorrupt "true" catholic, or *universal church,* consisting of all believers in Christ past, present and future. 4. A congregation, association, community or organization of persons with Christian beliefs. 5. An organization of many congregations. 6. A denominational family. 7. The Church as an abstract universal institution.

is holy even where fanatical spirits reign, if only they deny not the Word and sacraments. For if these be denied, there cannot be the church. Wherefore, wheresoever the substance of the Word and sacraments remaineth, there is the holy Church."[29]

If Luther were living in the complex society of the twentieth century, he would probably take some sociological factors into consideration when defining the local church. Luther believed that inasmuch as the Holy Spirit is operative in and through the sacraments, as well as in and through the Word, there can be no sanctification apart from this operation. Of course, Luther believed the Word and sacraments operate through the church. Watson quotes Luther at several points to give a clear statement on the work of sanctification of the Holy Spirit and the Word through the church: "The work of the Word and the Spirit, it should be noticed, is not effected apart from the Church. It is the proper work of the Spirit to make the Church; which Luther defines as the community of saints and as a Christian holy people which believe in Christ. This people is the special community of the Spirit in the world, as a mother that conceives every Christian by the Word of God, which he reveals and preaches."[30]

II. PRACTICAL OUTWORKING OF SANCTIFICATION

Martin Luther gives a theological foundation for sanctification, but he does not stop there. He goes on to apply practically to the life, "how a man can become holy."

1. *The flesh cannot be eradicated but should be bridled and subdued.* Martin Luther at no place indicates sinless perfection. He indicates: "Indeed it is true that even the godly . . . are tempted with fleshly lusts."[31] Even when Luther explains the phrase, "Walk in the spirit that ye obey not the flesh" (Gal. 5:16), he implies that walking in the Spirit does not mean sinless perfection—"I do not require of you that ye should utterly put off the flesh or kill it, but that ye shall bridle and subdue it."[32]

According to Luther a man could be two things, both at the same time. He could be, in respect to the flesh, a sinner

[29] *Galatians, op. cit.,* p. 40.
[30] Watson, *op. cit.,* p. 168.
[31] *Galatians, op. cit.,* p. 498.
[32] *Ibid.,* p. 499.

with lust and desires, and at the same time, he could be righteous in respect to the Holy Spirit. In speaking of this Luther states: "Notwithstanding, our righteousness is much more plentiful than our sin, because the holiness and righteousness of Christ our Mediator doth far exceed the sin of the whole world."[33] Note, Luther is not giving license to sin, for he has said: "Doth not require the godly, that they should utterly put off or destroy the flesh: but they should bridle it."[34]

2. *Resist evil by the Spirit.* Luther sees the battle of the flesh against the spirit within his members. He indicates with Paul that these are contrary one to another so that many times he cannot do those things that he would. One of his weapons in the battle against the "old man" is to resist "him by the Spirit."[35] Later Luther explains that the believer is to take the flesh and "subject it to the Spirit."[36]

Man must continually be reminded of the battle against sin. Luther exhorts his listeners: "Listen! You want to be a Christian, but at the same time you want to remain an adulterer, a fornicator, a drunken pig."[37] But Luther did not leave his audience with guilt. "Christ has earned us not only *gratia,* grace, for us but also *donum,* the gift of the Holy Spirit, so that we might not only have the forgiveness of sins, but also stop sinning."[38]

3. *Sanctification comes through meditation on the Word of God and invocation of Christ.* Here, Luther indicates a practical avenue for victory over carnal lust. If a man is given to gluttony, "fasting represses the gross assault of fleshly lusts."[39] But, Luther goes on to say that the inner desires of the flesh are not overcome with the abstinence of meat and drink. So he offers as a solution: "desires of the flesh are overcome . . . only by the earnest meditation of the Word of God and invocation of Christ."[40]

4.*The warning of eternal punishment if sanctification is neglected.* This is not a strong theme in Luther's writings, yet its presence is evidenced. Luther warns: "If they obey the

[33] *Ibid.*
[34] *Ibid.,* p. 500.
[35] *Ibid.,* p. 502.
[36] *Ibid.,* p. 522.
[37] Plass, *op. cit.,* p. 7.
[38] *Galatians, op. cit.,* p. 522.
[39] *Ibid.,* p. 523.
[40] *Ibid.*

flesh in fulfilling the law thereof, then do they lose faith in the Holy Ghost."[41] To those who are in danger of eternal punishment, Luther does not cut off a means of return. "Those who have fallen can be raised up and recover faith in the Holy Ghost."[42]

Let it be understood, Luther does not say that all those who have fleshly lusts, or even those who yield to fleshly lusts, will be eternally lost. Luther himself admitted possessing fleshly lusts and yielding to them. He describes two kinds of men. The first kind of man: "They shall never be without the desires and battle of the flesh: notwithstanding, they (desires) do not hurt them. But of this matter, we must thus judge, that it is one thing to be provoked of the flesh, and yet not willingly to yield to the lust and desires thereof, but to walk after the leading of the Spirit, and to resist the flesh."[43] This first man will inherit eternal life. Later Luther says of the second man: "It is another thing to assent to the flesh, and without all fear or remorse to perform and fulfill the works thereof, and to continue therein, and yet, notwithstanding, to counterfeit holiness and to brag of the Spirit."[44] This second man is the one who is in danger of losing his eternal inheritance.

III. CONCLUSION

What can be said of Luther's concept of sanctification? Contrary to Erasmus and Wesley's accusation, Luther has a positive, dynamic concept of sanctification. Like his doctrine of justification, it is theocentric—as God justifies man, God also sanctifies man. By faith, man appropriates the active process of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, which in turn purifies the man, frees him to fulfill good works, bringing glory to God. Man's sanctification is never to the glory of a man, as though man could glory in any holiness of his own. Even in sanctification, Luther's watchword becomes paramount: *soli deo gloris.*

[41] *Ibid.*, p. 507.
[42] *Ibid.*, p. 511.
[43] *Ibid.*
[44] *Ibid.*

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