

# The Lutheran Doctrine Of Sanctification And Its Rivals

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by John F. Brug

The doctrine of sanctification has been a focal point of interest and controversy throughout the history of the Christian church. We are, of course, now speaking of “sanctification” in the narrower sense of the term, that is, of Scripture’s teaching concerning the process by which our inner and outer life is brought more and more into conformity with God’s will. Debate about this doctrine has sometimes centered on “theoretical,” doctrinal issues, such as the relationship of justification to sanctification or the possibility of Christians’ attaining perfection in this lifetime. Just as often controversy has revolved around the “practical” questions, “How can we increase the level of sanctification in the lives of Christians?” and “What tools and methods should we use to produce such an increase?”

That this topic continues to be a hot issue, especially in the evangelical church, is demonstrated by the recent publication of *Christian Spirituality, Five Views of Sanctification*. This book is a debate among the adherents of five major views of sanctification which have contended for acceptance in the evangelical church: the Lutheran, the Reformed, the Wesleyan, the Pentecostal, and the Contemplative. Unfortunately, the presentation labeled “Lutheran” in this debate was a far cry from the true Lutheran teaching, drawn from the Holy Scriptures and confessed in the orthodox writings of the Lutheran Church. We can no longer assume that Lutherans hold the Lutheran doctrine of sanctification. Many Lutherans have been influenced both by the views of modern liberalism and by the Wesleyan-Arminian views which dominate contemporary evangelical Protestantism.

To find the true Lutheran teaching of sanctification we will have to go *ad fontes*, back to the sources. We turn first of all to the pages of Holy Scripture to find there the true scriptural teaching as confessed by the Lutheran church. In the second part of our study we will examine some of the rival versions of the doctrine of sanctification which are contending for acceptance in the evangelical church. Finally, we will consider the danger that some of the unscriptural elements of these rival teachings may be insinuating their way into the teaching of the Lutheran church.

## THE LUTHERAN TEACHING OF SANCTIFICATION

Let us briefly review the emphases of the Lutheran teaching of sanctification drawn from Holy Scripture.

**True Lutheran teaching emphasizes the importance and necessity of sanctification, Christian living, and good works in the life of every Christian.**

Producing sanctification in the lives of Christ’s people is one of the purposes of his death. “He gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.” (Tit 2:14) Good works are part of God’s ongoing plan for the life of every Christian. “We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (Eph 2:10) Producing good works in the lives of people is a goal of Lutheran preaching and teaching. “I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone.” (Tit 3:8) A preacher of the whole counsel of God urges his hearers to devote themselves to good works. “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing

to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.” (Ro 12:1) “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.” ( Eph 4:1)

Like Paul and Luther before them true Lutheran teachers today may have to defend themselves against the charge that they undercut the importance of good works. But like Paul and the Lutheran confessors we can respond, “Do we nullify the importance of good works by emphasizing Christ’s sacrifice above all else? Not at all! On the contrary, when we focus on what Christ has done for us, we emphasize the one message that has the power to produce good works in the lives of Christians.”

Sanctification is not only important in the life of every Christian. It is also necessary. Good works are not necessary as a payment for sin nor to earn or even to assure salvation. But they are necessary as something that God has commanded. They are further necessary as a natural consequence of the change that the Holy Spirit has produced in every Christian. Just as it is the nature of a healthy apple tree to produce apples and of a grape vine to produce grapes, so it is the nature of a branch attached to Christ to produce Christlike fruits of faith. (Jn 15:5)

**True Lutheran teaching emphasizes the distinction of justification from sanctification.**

It is, of course, true that justification and sanctification can never be separated, since both always coexist in the life of every Christian. But it is also true that they must be clearly distinguished, and the proper role must be assigned to each.

Justification is the verdict of God by which sinners are pronounced righteous. God declares that all their sins are forgiven because Christ has paid for them in full. Justification thus takes place outside the sinner. This justification is complete. The sinner contributes nothing to it. The sinner does not cooperate in it. Those who have faith in Christ do not go through a process by which they become more justified.

Sanctification is a moral change which God works in every Christian. The Holy Spirit, working through the means of grace, produces an inner change in the hearts and minds of believers. As a result they do good works which glorify God. Christians cooperate with God in their sanctification. Sanctification, however, unlike justification, will never be complete in this lifetime. It is an ongoing process in which we become more like Christ.

Sanctification and good works are not a cause of our justification, that is, they contribute nothing to our obtaining of forgiveness of sins. Christian living is not a part of justification. Our sanctification is a result of our justification. The forgiveness of sins which we have received in justification motivates us to show our love for God through Christian living. (Ro 6)

**True Lutheran teaching concerning sanctification clearly distinguishes the roles of the law and the gospel in sanctification.**

Only the gospel produces sanctification, since only the gospel can provide the proper motivation which enables us to produce works pleasing to God. The gospel of free and complete forgiveness sets us free from futile attempts to save ourselves by our deeds. No longer driven by fear of God’s judgment or by our own self-interest, we are given power to serve God freely, not in order to earn his favor, but to show our love for him who loved us first.

The gospel of grace is not merely the most effective motivation for good works. No, the gospel provides the only motivation for good works pleasing to God. The writers of Scripture again and again appeal to God’s forgiving grace as the primary motivation for sanctification.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, *in view of God’s mercy*, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. (Ro 12:1)

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children, and *live a life of love, just as Christ loved us* and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Eph 5:1,2)

He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him *who died for them* and was raised again. (2 Co 5:15 )

The law, on the other hand, cannot produce sanctification. As a curb it can, to some degree, restrain the unbeliever and the sinful nature of the Christian from gross outbursts of sin. It does this with its threats of punishment and its promises of reward. At best, this function of the law produces only a civic or outward righteousness, which is beneficial for earthly life, but which cannot win the favor of God or forgiveness of sins.

As a mirror the law reveals to sinners their sinful deeds, their fallen nature, and their inability to save themselves. For fallen sinners this is the first, that is, the most important function of the law.

In sanctification the law serves only as a guide or a rule for life. This has traditionally been called “the third use of the law.” Because the Christian person still has a sinful nature, he needs the law of God to identify those deeds, words, and attitudes which are commanded by God and which are pleasing to him. Love fulfills the law, but our sinful nature all too readily seeks to disguise its selfish desires as “love.” God’s commandments identify true love for us.

Although the Christian person is not under the law (that is, in so far as he is new man he is not motivated by threats of the law), the Christian is not *without* law. “I myself am not *under* the law. . . though I am *not without* God’s law but am *in* Christ’s law.” (1 Co 9:20,21. N.B.: NIV is inaccurate here)

To be a good work pleasing to God a deed needs two characteristics: It must be properly motivated, and it must be in conformity to God’s will. The gospel provides the first characteristic, proper motivation. The law defines the second characteristic, conformity to God’s will. Lutheran teaching of sanctification carefully distinguishes the roles of law and gospel, but it also emphasizes the importance and necessity of each.

**Lutheran teaching emphasizes the priority of the means of grace as the tools God uses in producing sanctification in the lives of his people.**

In emphasizing the priority of the means of grace we are not, of course, minimizing the fact that God himself is the author of our sanctification. We teach, “It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” (Php 2:13) We are rather confessing the scriptural teaching that God has chosen to have the Holy Spirit work through means, that is, through the gospel in word and sacraments. Among evangelical churches the Lutheran church is unique in giving full recognition to the role of the sacraments in producing sanctification.

Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. (1 Pe 1:22-23)

We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. (Ro 6:4)

**Lutherans emphasize the means of grace in their efforts to help Christians grow in sanctification since only the means of grace produce the proper motivation for sanctification. Nevertheless, in our preaching and teaching we should also refer to other**

**means which God may use in a secondary way to strengthen and encourage us in our sanctification.**

Foremost among these is *prayer*. We do not confuse prayer with the means of grace as many other Protestants do. Because prayer is our act toward God, we cannot place it on the same level as the means of grace, which are God's gracious speaking to us. Nevertheless, we can and should pray for strength and guidance in sanctification, both for ourselves and for others.

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God. (Col 1:9, 10.)

With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith. (2 Th 1:11)

We may be encouraged by the *example* of other Christians. Lutheran teachers may use the example of Christ and the example of other Christians (or even their own example) while urging others to grow in sanctification.

You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. (1 Th 1:6)

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your-sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. (2 Co 8:9)

And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches... They did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will. So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. (2 Co 8:1,5,6)

Join with others in following my example, brothers. and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. (Php 3:17)

Therefore I urge you to imitate me. (1 Co 4:16)

God may prompt us to specific good works by the *station in life* which he gives us or by *specific circumstances and occasions* which place opportunities to do good before us.

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. (1 Ti 6:17-18)

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. (Gal 6:10)

There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land. (Dt 15:11)

Aware of this, Jesus said to them, "Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. (Mt 26:10,11)

Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. (Heb 12:10)

Although our works do not merit any reward from God, he graciously promises us that nothing we do in his name will be unrewarded. We may, therefore, use this *promise of reward* to encourage ourselves and others in our life of sanctification.

God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. (Heb 6:10)

If anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward.” (Mt 10:42 )

Peter answered him, “We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?” Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. (Mt 19:27-29)

Even as we encourage with the promise of reward, we will at the same time warn against a work-for-wages spirit.

So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, “We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.” (Lk 17:10)

But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first. (Mt 19:30 & Mt 20:1-16)

**Lutheran teaching of sanctification emphasizes God’s power, rather than human effort, as the source of sanctification.**

It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. (Php 2 :13 )

God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. (2 Co 9:8)

**Lutheran teaching, nevertheless, emphasizes also the importance and necessity of our cooperation and effort in our sanctification. Unlike Christ’s work in justification, the work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification does not substitute for our efforts.**

Scripture often admonishes us to be eager participants in Christian living. Sometimes it does this with general admonitions.

Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. (Ro 6:13)

For in my inner being I delight in God’s law. (Ro 7:22)

Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall. (2 Pe 1:10)

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling. (Php 2:12)

At other times it encourages zeal or dedication in specific acts of sanctification.

Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. (1 Ti 6:18)

Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Co 9:7)

Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. (2 Co 8:11)

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. “In your anger do not sin” : Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need. Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Eph 4:25-32)

So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church. (1 Co 14:12)

Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve. (1 Pe 5:2)

Although the Holy Spirit is the creator of our faith, but he does not believe for us. In the same way though God is the source of our sanctification, he does not do our good works for us.

For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Eph 2:10)

**Lutheran teaching of sanctification also warns of the struggle and difficulty that every Christian will face in sanctification.**

For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God’s law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin. (Ro 7: 22-25 )

For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. (Gal 5:17)

We urge all Christians to apply themselves wholeheartedly to their sanctification.

Sanctification calls for effort and struggle on our part. We are to use all the tools God has given us. We avoid giving believers the impression that they are just “to let go and let Jesus.”

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. (Col 3:5)

It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God. (1 Th 4:3—5)

Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings. (1 Pe 5:9)

Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin. (1 Pe 4:1)

But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. (1 Ti 6:11)

Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. (2 Ti 2:22)

Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. (Heb 12:14)

**Lutheran teaching recognizes the sanctification will never be perfect in this life.**

The standard set by God's law is unattainable even with our greatest effort, because that standard is perfection.

Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and, with all your mind." (Mt 22:37)

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Mt 5:48)

The Christian himself recognizes that he cannot meet this standard.

We know that the law is spiritual; but *I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin*. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but *I cannot carry it out*. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, *the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing*. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. (Ro 7:14-23)

Lutheran teachers do not expect all Christians to be at the same level of sanctification. Nor do we cast doubts on the Christianity of others when they are not at the level we might like.

Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. (Ro 14:4)

You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. (Mt 7:5)

Lutheran teachers do not confuse outward morality with true sanctification. Nor do they confuse and intermingle the church's mission (changing people's conduct by changing their heart with the gospel) with the state's mission (changing people's outward conduct by threats and rewards).

He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight. (Lk 16:15)

**Lutheran teachers thank God for progress in sanctification and commend Christians for the gains that have been made.**

A Lutheran preacher assures his people that God is pleased with the works which they do as a result of their faith.

You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Pe 2:5)

And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. (Heb 13:16)

A Lutheran preacher should not hesitate to praise and commend Christians for the good works which he sees in their lives.

I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the teachings, just as I passed them on to you. (1 Co 11:2)

I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me... I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. (Php 4:10,18)

**Lutheran teaching of sanctification urges people never to rest on their laurels, but to keep striving to advance.**

Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, *I press on* toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Php 3:13,14) Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now *we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more.* (1 Th 4:1)

And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers, to *do so more and more.* (1 Th 4:10)

**Lutheran teaching of sanctification keeps believers' eyes on the goals of sanctification.**

Present goals are the *glory of God, assurance of faith for ourselves, testimony to others, and help to others:*

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. (Mt 5:14,16)

This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. (Jn 15:8)

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out [for yourselves] your salvation with fear and trembling. (Php 2:12)

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test? (2 Co 13:5)

Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. (1 Pe 3:1-2)

Therefore, as we have opportunity let us do good to all people. (Gal 6:10)

The final goal is *perfection in heaven.*

Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. (2 Pe 3:11,12)

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. (1 Jn 3:2)

**SUMMARY**

In preaching about sanctification the Lutheran teacher strives to avoid two opposing pitfalls—legalism on the one hand and antinomianism on the other. We also remember that in dealing with Christians we are dealing with a paradox—saint, yet sinner. We speak both of what the Christian *is* and of what he *ought* to be, of what God has done for him and of what he ought to do. We should expect our Christian hearers to obey God's commands since the Holy Spirit is



living in them, but we should remember that they, like us, will at times fall short. Although they will always be motivated by the gospel, they will never be purely and completely motivated by the gospel. We should challenge Christians to persevere in the faith and to grow in good works, but when they fail, we should pronounce again and again the forgiveness Christ has won for us. We should never point to human weakness or the sins of others as an excuse for Christians' sins or their laziness in doing good, though we may remind them of the sins of even the heroes of faith in Scripture, lest they despair and doubt their faith. Like sanctification itself, preaching sanctification will always remain a struggle for us as we strive to keep in balance the two teachings of God's Word, Law and Gospel.

## **OTHER VIEWS OF SANCTIFICATION**

### **REFORMED SANCTIFICATION**

In this section we will contrast the Lutheran teaching of sanctification drawn from Scripture with other teachings which confuse the biblical doctrine of sanctification.

In contrasting the Reformed and Lutheran views of sanctification we are using the term "Reformed" in its proper, narrow sense. The term "Reformed" properly refers to the Calvinistic branch of Protestantism, especially the Presbyterians and those churches which have the word "Reformed" in their name. The term "Reformed" should not be used loosely to refer to Protestant and Evangelical teaching in general. Most Protestant churches in America are not Calvinist/Reformed, but Wesleyan/Arminian in their theology. Often trends that are decried as "Reformed" influences on Lutheran theology are not "Reformed," but Wesleyan/Arminian.

In fact, of all of the views commonly held in American Evangelicalism, the Reformed view of sanctification is closest to the scriptural teaching. Generally, it is more orthodox than the view of heterodox Lutheranism.

As an example of the Reformed position we make take the presentation by Sinclair Ferguson in *Christian Spirituality*.

Ferguson defines sanctification as "the consistent practical outworking of what it means to belong to the new creation in Christ." The Reformed emphasize the objective work of Christ and our union with Christ as the source and foundation of our sanctification. Christians, therefore, should not focus on their own progress, but on God's activity in redemptive history. Sanctification is neither self-induced nor created in us by divine fiat. Christians live a life of sanctification by drawing on the resources that have already been deposited in their name in God's bank. The Reformed emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit working in us as the source of sanctification. But God works this holiness in us by engaging our minds, wills, emotions and action. The Reformed, therefore, also emphasize the exercise of our faith as a source of growth in sanctification. The primary tool used to promote such growth in faith and works is the Word of God. Calvinists stress the third use of the law as a guide in sanctification. Other "means of grace" are suffering and the cross (often called "the providences"), the fellowship of the church, and the sacraments. The Reformed reject perfectionism and recognize the struggle, conflict, and tension that remain in every Christian. Most Reformed exegesis, at least until recently, has recognized that Romans 7:14-25 refers to the life of the regenerate person. A Christian must see himself from two perspectives, *simul justus et peccator*.

The Reformed retain most of the biblical teaching of sanctification. We would have to take issue with the Reformed teaching primarily in the following areas: For them the primary use of the law is the third use of the law as a rule, rather than its use as a mirror, which we Lutherans would call the primary use. They do not always distinguish clearly the role of the gospel and the

law in sanctification. They may even speak of “the grace of the law.” Although the Reformed stress the value of the sacraments in pointing us away from ourselves to Christ, they, nevertheless, too narrowly restrict the sacraments to being only signs, rather than truly effective means of grace.

Other problems arise when they limit God’s provision for sanctification only to the elect and when they at times classify works as part of faith, rather than as a result of faith. Like most other Protestants the Reformed see reforming society by law as part of the mission of the church per se.

### **WESLEYAN/ARMINIAN SANCTIFICATION**

James Arminius regarded himself, not as an Arminian, but as a moderate Calvinist. At the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century he tried to correct what he regarded as the exaggerations of Calvin’s view by the strictest Calvinists of his day. He took issue especially with limited atonement and double predestination. However, when doing this, he fell into the opposite trap of granting to man power to cooperate in his conversion. Arminius himself probably would not have been able to accept full-blown “Arminianism” as it was developed out of the work of Wesley in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is this Wesleyan Arminianism which has characterized much of American Protestantism especially Methodists and most Baptists.

In this paper we will have to limit our attention primarily to one version of this Wesleyan view of sanctification as it is exemplified by the presentation of Laurence Wood in *Christian Spirituality*.

The starting point of Wesley’s “Methodist” spirituality was an emphasis on following the right method or program to increase sanctification. The Wesleyan approach to the Word is different from that of Calvinism. In the Wesleyan tradition there is an emphasis on personal experience, tradition and reason as aids in interpreting Scripture. Expository preaching holds the central place in Reformed worship, but in Wesleyan worship emotional preaching is more central as the tool for promoting sanctification.

For Wesley the center of the Gospel was Christian perfection. This Christian perfectionism is the unique focal point of Wesleyan spirituality. Christians are expected to love God with all their hearts. Although all may not reach the goal, all Christians are expected to pursue the goal of perfection in this life.

Harsh reality forced Wesley and his followers to waffle on the definition of Christian perfection. “Christian perfection” is not absolute perfection, Adamic perfection, or angelic perfection. Like all perfectionists Wesley had to minimize the Law’s definition of sin. Even when a Christian’s love is perfect, his actions may not be. Such imperfect behavior, however, may be due to repressed psychological complexes rather than to a sinful heart. Even sinful desires are not sinful if one does not give in to them. We are not directly responsible for original sin, only for actual sin.

Wesleyans look for a “second grace” beyond conversion and justification as the avenue to attaining “entire sanctification.” This second grace is our own personal Pentecost. The Wesleyan emphasis on spurring Christians on to higher sanctification sometimes distorts or minimizes the reality of the gifts we already received in baptism or conversion.

Wesley was not far from a return to Catholicism when he stressed that both justification by faith and a life lived in obedience to God are necessary for salvation. “Sanctification by faith through grace alone” is considered Wesley’s special contribution to the church in contrast to Luther’s emphasis on justification by faith. The roles of law and gospel are often confused in Wesleyanism.

## PENTECOSTAL SANCTIFICATION

Pentecostalism is a natural outgrowth of Wesleyanism via the Holiness movement. Today “pentecostalism” most properly refers to the old-line Pentecostal bodies that originated early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The pentecostal infiltration of main-line denominations, including even Catholicism and Lutheranism, may best be referred to as neo-pentecostalism or the charismatic movement. Some form of pentecostalism may be practiced by more than 20% of the world’s Christians. The view of sanctification is similar throughout the various types.

As our example we will use the presentation of Russel Spittler in *Christian Spirituality*.

The earmarks of pentecostalism are the twin emphases on the work of the Holy Spirit and on the relevance of special gifts of the Spirit such as tongues and healing for contemporary Christians. It was the latter emphasis which separated Pentecostals from the Holiness Movement that grew out of Wesleyanism. Most pentecostals insist on the *necessity* of tongues for believers. Most charismatics insist on the *desirability* of tongues, but not the necessity.

Wesleyan pentecostals retain the Wesleyan emphasis on sanctification as a second work of grace after conversion. They would go on to add the charismatic gifts as a third grace, the baptism of the Spirit. Examples of such groups would be the Church of God (Cleveland, TN), the Pentecostal Holiness Church, and the Church of God in Christ.

A more “Reformed” or “Baptistic” group of pentecostals combines sanctification and baptism of the Spirit into one experience. They see sanctification as a gradual process that goes on throughout life. The church of the Foursquare Gospel and the Assemblies of God are examples of such churches.

A weird breakoff of the Assemblies of God, which survives in the United Pentecostal Church, practices a strange reverse Unitarianism. Only Jesus is God. The Father and the Holy Spirit are only names of his. Therefore, baptism is only in Jesus’ name.

Common denominators in the spirituality of all these groups are an extreme emphasis on personal experience and special gifts of the Spirit. Obedience is the key motif of pentecostal hymns (trust and obey; there’s no other way.) Legalistic piety is commonplace. Emphasis is on small group sharing of experience. The faith or level of sanctification or other Christians is too often judged by whether they can demonstrate the presence of the requisite experiences. Triumphalism, pride and elitism are dangers of pentecostal spirituality.

## CONTEMPLATIVE/MYSTIC SANCTIFICATION

Contemplative piety emphasizes the inner life and loving attentiveness to God as the road to greater sanctification. Real love of God doesn’t just happen. It requires attentiveness.

The contemplative view is represented by the presentation of Glenn Hinson in *Christian Spirituality*.

The roots of contemplative Christianity lie in the mysticism of medieval Catholicism (although there are also influences from Eastern Christianity and even oriental religions). The goal of the contemplative is to see God already in this lifetime and to be united to him. The key to this quest is purity of heart. (Mt 5:8) How are we to obtain such purity? By humbling ourselves, abandoning ourselves and giving ourselves over to God. When we empty ourselves in the dark night of the soul, we open ourselves to an invasion by the love of God which purifies us and recreates us in his own image. Among the tools used by contemplatives is “compunction,” a feeling of grief for sins and for the suffering of others which is felt to the point of tears. The contemplative passes from the love of self for self’s sake, to the love of God for self’s sake, to love of God for God’s sake, to the highest state—love of self for God’s sake, that is, putting

oneself completely at God's disposals. In the contemplative view we grow primarily by means of God's love as it is subjectively experienced, rather than as it is revealed in Scripture.

In the first and lowest stage one seeks to know God with the mind, through reason and the study of Scripture. Here we learn how to pray. In the second stage, the heart takes precedence over the head. In modern terms, this may be expressed as the "rocking chair prayer" of the grandmother who just sits with her Bible open and thinks about God. Next comes the "sleep of the faculties." God begins to pour into us like water from a river. Finally, there is "love on fire with contemplation." Now the contemplative knows God perfectly.

Most contemplatives deny charges that they are trying to raise themselves up to God by their works of meditation. They claim their meditation is a response to God's grace.

Contemplative tendencies and traditions survive in much Protestant hymnody, including some sanitized versions in our Lutheran hymnal. In Protestantism contemplative influences have been strongest among the followers of Wesley, whose piety mixed contemplation, mysticism and evangelical grace. Contemplation seems out of style in our busy world, but it seems to be reviving in the work of such people as Thomas Merton.

Two of the most serious problems with the contemplative's road to sanctification are the following: it downplays the means of grace by assigning them to the lowest stage of our ascent to God; it has a hard time avoiding the clutches of practical Pelagianism.

The Bible stresses that God came down to us in Christ. We now come to him not by raising ourselves up to a vision of God's glory, but by accepting the humble way he has come down to earth. As God taught Moses already in Exodus 32, our greatest present need is not to see God's glory, but to experience his grace and mercy. The gospel is not, "God loves you, now love him back. If you love him enough, you will reach him." No, Scripture teaches us that God has already reconciled us to himself and urges us, "Be reconciled to God." In focusing on the cross we see God's love for us most clearly.

### **LIBERAL LUTHERAN SANCTIFICATION**

Unfortunately, the "Lutheran" section of *Christian Spirituality* is not Lutheran. It does, however, give us one sample of how the Lutheran teaching of sanctification is being distorted in contemporary Lutheranism. It is too bad that the editors did not get a more faithful representative of the Lutheran position, such as Harold Senkbeil. The spokesman they chose, Gerhard Forde, was a major contributor to the ill-named *Christian Dogmatics*, edited by Braaten and Jenson. Forde's doctrinal position provides a typical example of the ELCA doctrine of justification, which lacks an objective atonement for sin, and of the ELCA doctrine of sanctification, which effectively eliminates from sanctification both the third use of the law and the struggle against sin.

For Forde law and gospel are not distinct scriptural teachings which assert certain propositions. They are rather two different styles of communicating an existential religious encounter of the vaguest kind.

In his presentation of justification in the locus of Braaten and Jenson entitled "Christian Life" Forde's downgrading of the biblical concept of the law was a major factor in his failure to present Christ's work of atonement as a real payment for sin. Forde strongly emphasizes the unconditional nature of justification, but his version of justification is not founded on a real objective payment for sin, a meeting of the demands of God's law.

Forde's trashing of the biblical concept of law naturally also wreaks havoc on his presentation of sanctification in *Christian Spirituality*. He defines sanctification as *the art of getting used to justification*. This makes sanctification simply the enjoyment of our status as

children of God. Forde dismisses from sanctification both the role of the law and the struggle of the believer. He classifies sanctification as the Holy Spirit's work, not ours, in such a way as to virtually eliminate the struggle against sin which is prominent in the life of the believer according to the New Testament. Forde overstates God's role as the acting subject of sanctification in such a way as to virtually eliminate the God "who works in you to will and do of his good pleasure." In defining growth in sanctification as "coming to be captivated more and more by the unconditionality of the grace of God" he blends faith, the motivating power of the gospel, and growth in sanctification into a strange brew. His skillful use of clever words and false dilemmas produces a vague amorphous doctrine. Forde undercuts the believer's effort in sanctification with his pet slogan, "We are not moving toward the goal, but the goal is moving toward us." How does this square with Philippians 3:12-16?

Taken together Forde's two contributions are an excellent illustration of the truth that a defective presentation of justification and a defective presentation of sanctification are natural, almost inevitable, companions. Antinomianism is the fraternal twin of antigospelism.

It is truly disappointing to see every respondent from the whole spectrum of Protestantism in a position to make valid and telling criticisms of the "Lutheran" view of sanctification as misrepresented by Forde in *Christian Spirituality*. At least the response of Ferguson, the Reformed spokesman, refers to "Dr. Forde's edition of the Lutheran teaching." Apparently Ferguson realized that he was not dealing with the real thing. The Wesleyan respondent was distressed by Forde's "unwillingness to connect good works to sanctification." The Pentecostal spokesman responds, "Instant prosperity and effortless sanctification both look wrong to me." He classifies Forde's effortless sanctification as a clear steer down the road to antinomianism. The Contemplative respondent notes that Forde's inadequate view of justification is the core of his problem. How sad that many American Christians are getting their impression of Lutheranism through theologians like Forde.

Luther certainly emphasized the free grace of God as the source of forgiveness and the power of the Holy Spirit in us as the source of sanctification, but he never stopped preaching the struggle that remains in sanctification. In a sermon on Ephesians 4:22-28 he said, "It will do no good to think and say, 'The doctrine has been presented. This certainly is enough, for where the Spirit and faith are found fruits and good works will follow of their own accord.' For although the Spirit is present and, as Christ says, is willing and also at work in believers, still the flesh, weak and indolent is opposed to him. ... Therefore we must not let people go on as if it were not necessary to admonish them and urge them through the Word of God to lead a good life. No, you dare not be negligent and remiss in this matter." (See Plass, II, 659-660) Lutheran preachers would do better to listen to Luther than to Forde and the like.

### **CONCLUSION**

After we have compared the scriptural teaching of sanctification with its contemporary rivals, do any of these departures from the truth seem to stand out as special dangers and temptations to Lutheran teachers today? Although the details and forms vary from time to time and place to place, the twin dangers to the Lutheran teaching of sanctification are always pretty much the same.

The first danger to sanctification is to rely on the preaching of the law to produce outward works. Fear of punishment and hope of reward are very effective motivators, and so they often achieve quick results in producing outward improvement in behavior. For this reason the impatient teacher is tempted to quit relying on the gospel and to go for quick, visible results.

This is a special temptation in our day when people are very oriented to judging success on the basis of visible, measurable results.

A contemporary manifestation of this danger is the prevalence of what could be called “psychomethodism,” which seeks the magic way to sanctification in plans for following the right “steps” as the way to sanctification. A framework of laws or principles are to be followed as the effective way of producing sanctification. In essence a method of programmed sanctification is substituted for the motivating power of the gospel.

Another manifestation of this tendency is found in Christian social action groups which try to force society to conform to God’s standards by means of lobbying and legislation and which regard such efforts as part of the mission of the church.

The second danger to sanctification is to neglect specific preaching of the law. One motive for this hesitance is fear of offending sinners. This temptation is universal, but it may be more threatening than ever today when people flaunt their self-centeredness in such an obvious way and the church seems to feel a need to accommodate itself to meeting their desires.

Contemporary manifestations of this tendency include: psychological explanations of sin which minimize the personal responsibility of the sinner, corporate views of sin which shift the focus of blame from the individual sinner to society, selective morality which focuses on a few sins common to others instead of homing in on the sins of the hearers, and the contemporary variety of mysticism which substitutes feeling good about yourself for obedience to God’s law.

The sad fact is that almost all aberrations in the teaching of sanctification are both antinomian and legalistic at the same time. They are antinomian in that they set aside the need for clear, specific, and complete application of God’s law to the sins of the hearers. They are legalistic in that they set up some other standard in the place of God’s law as the measure or method to sanctification.

No system of morality can operate without a standard. Wherever God’s standard is set aside, something must be substituted. It may be the subjective judgment of the individual or the consensus of society. It may be ascetic or libertine or both at the same time. But in every case a human set of rules or a human system for achieving goodness is substituted for God’s way.

Biblical, Lutheran teaching of sanctification is nothing more than a variety of the correct division of law and gospel. To be sure, there are some useful books around which give a good example of how to do this, such as Walther’s *Law and Gospel*. But at the risk of oversimplification I would suggest three sets of reading for the Lutheran preacher who wants to know how to teach sanctification. First, read Paul’s epistles. Second, read Paul’s epistles. Third, read Paul’s epistles. If the concept is still not clear, repeat steps 1 to 3 as often as necessary.

Paul’s basic method is pretty straight forward. 1). Preach the gospel. 2) Give specific concrete moral directives, relevant to the experience and station of his hearers. It does not get much more complicated than that.

His method is quite a contrast to the sanctification handbooks which flood Christian bookstores. He doesn’t focus on sentimental testimonials about how to achieve a satisfying relationship with Jesus. He offers no magic list of “keys,” “secrets,” and “steps” to achieve true spirituality (with a few bible passages thrown in, along with some charts and diagrams to guide you through the maze). He does not promise spiritual growth if you follow the right psychological techniques of positive thinking. The heart of his method boils down to this—he preaches the gospel, he preaches the law. Everything else is secondary and peripheral.

If we want to increase sanctification in our members, we cannot improve on this tried and true method. Our gospel content will be exactly the same as Paul’s. The general content of our

preaching of the law will be the same as Paul's. The only difference will be that the specific points of the law which need to be emphasized at a given time will depend on our diagnosis of which sins are especially prevalent or threatening to our hearers. If we preach the whole counsel of God, the result will be growth in sanctification. If we don't preach the whole counsel of God, our presentation of sanctification will always be defective. Other methods can produce some counterfeit works that may even look more appealing than the real thing. The surface may look beautiful, but the core is hollow or rotten.

Preaching sanctification is much like walking a tightrope. Lean to one side and you may fall into legalism. Lean the other way and you may fall into antinomianism. The best way to keep your balance is to delve daily and deeply into the Word. First, go to the Word to get things into balance yourself. Second, share what you have mined from the Word with your hearers. Leave the measuring of the results to judgment day, but you can be sure there will be results.

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