Justification and Sanctification

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I think you already know about the infamous congregation in ancient Corinth that Paul founded. It was anything but a model congregation. It was divided by rivalries, jealousies, party spirit, lovelessness, but even worse, there were all sorts of immoral practices, men going off to the brothel because they thought that what they did in the body would not affect their spiritual life; they thought that only the soul was saved and that the body was evil. It seems that there was a particularly scandalous case of public immortality in the congregation where a man was living sexually with his mother, presumably step-mother. And the congregation seemed to be proud of it. Then there were various idolatrous practices connected with eating meat offered to idols. And of course there were quarrels and tensions in the congregation over charismatic gifts, some boasting that they were more spiritual than others and had greater gifts. This lovelessness was also evident in the abuses connected with the Lord’s Supper. And then to cap it all off, there were those in the Corinth who denied the resurrection of the body and who spoke only of a spiritual resurrection.

Imagine being the pastor of that congregation! Where would you begin? Well, let me remind you of where Paul begins in his first letter. He calls them saints. Unbelievable! How could they possibly be saints? We know that they were not saints in the moral sense of the word. Now you know what saints are? Forget for a moment the way that the Roman Catholic Church uses the word “saints”; that’s another use of the term. The word “saints” in the NT is just another word for holy people. So Paul addresses this congregation of sinners at Corinth as saints, holy people, and he can do so for one reason and one reason only: because they are baptised.

Listen to his opening address: “To the church of God at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be saints ...” (1:2). On what basis can Paul call the Christians at Corinth saints? It’s certainly not because they behave as saints; they certainly don’t look like holy people from the description that Paul gives us in First Corinthians. Paul gives the basis of their holiness already in the opening address that I just read out: Paul writes “to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be saints.” Did you hear that: He said they are sanctified in Christ Jesus; they are saints in Christ—and they are saints in Christ because of
their Baptism. That’s the basis of their sainthood: God’s action, God’s call; not their behaviour but their Baptism. We will come back to that later.

Let me remind you of what Paul says to them after he has chastised them for taking each other to court instead of dealing with their disputes themselves, and before he goes on to talk about their immortality and especially the problem of married Christian men habitually going to the prostitutes (chapters 5 & 6). Paul says to them: You have been washed (in other words: you have been baptised), you have been sanctified, you have been justified in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We can see from both Paul’s address to the congregation and from his words here, where he reminds them that they have been baptised and that they are holy in the Lord, how Paul approaches the problem. We can see his starting point. He does not begin with the law but with the gospel, because he is talking to Christians, certainly Christians who need to be strongly admonished and chastised, but Christians all the same. Even though he will have to speak stern words to them, that is not where he starts. He begins rather by reminding them of who they are in Christ. He reminds them that they are saints, that they are holy, that they have been transformed and renewed. What he basically says in the letter then is this: Live as saints; live as holy people; let your light shine—or better still, let’s the Christ’s light shine through you to the glory of God.

Today, I want to talk about the connection between justification and sanctification. Lutheran pastors have generally not been strong preachers of sanctification, except where they have come under the influence of pietism, revivalism, or Pentecostalism. The reason for this is that Lutheran pastors are generally more comfortable preaching justification than sanctification. That is to say, they have generally preached traditional law – gospel sermons. First they have used the law to expose sin and to bring people to repentance. Then they have preached the gospel with its message of forgiveness. However, as long as pastors stick rigidly to this law – gospel pattern of preaching where the intent has been to bring people to an awareness of their sin and guilt before God so that they could be comforted and encouraged by the message of forgiveness, they will never get to preach sanctification. They will never attend to the matter of holiness and holy living, Christian growth and discipleship, they will never address the problem of the different styles and patterns of Christian living
and the danger of legalism; they will not talk about the importance of the sanctified life and living in conformity with the image of Christ. They will not talk about how we are to deal with sin in our lives and what it means that the whole life of a Christian is to be a life of repentance.

I think we can learn from what Luther said to the antinomians in his day.1 Remember the antinomians were those people who believed that God’s law or commandments no longer had any place in the Christian life; they held that Christians were led by the Spirit and lived by the forgiveness proclaimed by the gospel and had no need of the law. They said that the place for the law was in the Town Hall, that is, in the legislature and the courtroom. In order words, the law belonged only to the civil realm, and not the church. Luther had much to say to the antinomians in showing them the error of their ways. But one of the things he said that is especially useful for us to hear speaks directly to our topic of justification and sanctification. Luther accused the antinomians of breaking the link between justification and sanctification; he said that they were strong on justification but weak on sanctification.

Listen to what he says:

They may be fine Easter preachers, but they are very poor Pentecost preachers, for they do not preach “about the sanctification by the Holy Spirit,” but solely about the redemption of Jesus Christ, although Christ (whom they extoll so highly, and rightly so) is Christ, that is, he has purchased redemption from sin and death so that the Holy Spirit might transform us out of the old Adam into new people—we die to sin and live to righteousness, beginning and growing here on earth and perfecting it beyond, as St. Paul teaches.2 For Christ earned for us not only gratia, “grace,” but also donum, “the gift of the Holy Spirit,” so that we might have not only the forgiveness of sins, but that we might also cease from sin. Now he who does not cease to sin, but persists in his former evil life, must have a different Christ, that of the Antinomians; the real Christ is not there..... But our Antinomians fail to see that they are preaching Christ without and against the Holy Spirit because they propose to let the people continue in their old ways and still pronounce them saved. And yet

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1 For the best summary of Luther’s arguments against the antinomians (led by Johann Agricola), see LW 47:99–119 (Against the Antinomians, 1539).
2 In, for example, Romans 6 and 7.
logic, too, implies that a Christian should have the Holy Spirit and lead a new life, or know that he has no Christ.  

From my experience in the Lutheran Church of Australia, pastors, at least in recent memory, have tended to be strong on preaching about God’s act of redemption, reconciliation, and forgiveness in Christ; that is, they have been strong preachers of justification; but they have not always been so strong on preaching about the life of sanctification. In Luther’s words, we have been poor Pentecost preachers. Of course, wherever the charismatic renewal movement is strong, and I know that it is quite strong in south East Asian countries, the situation will be the reverse and charismatic preachers may have to be reminded to make sure the objective message of the gospel, what God has done for us in his atoning work on Calvary, is not overshadowed by the emphasis on what the Spirit is doing through his gifts today. Either way, the link between justification and sanctification is in danger of being broken. However, Paul and Luther both say that the forgiveness of sins and the work of the Holy Spirit within us must be held together.

To come back to Luther, what he says to the antinomians is this: Christ has given us not only grace but also the gift of the Holy Spirit. To put it even more strongly, he says that we have received not only the forgiveness of sins but also the Spirit who empowers us to put an end to sinning. Elsewhere Luther says that the forgiveness of sins would not be genuine if it did not spur you on to begin to drive out sin through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It is not right to talk about the forgiveness of sins (which is justification) if you do not also say that the same God who forgives you also sends his Spirit to enable you to overcome sin, to sweep sin out of your life (which is sanctification). For Luther there is no genuine forgiveness of sin without a simultaneous sweeping out of sin. That term “sweeping out” that Luther uses here is what we mean by sanctification.

Before we start talking in more detail about sanctification, I need to say one thing. Although we need to strengthen our preaching of sanctification, it is very easy to go off the rails at this point and to fall into legalism. The challenge is to learn to preach sanctification evangelically, that is, to preach it in a way that makes it clear that sanctification is God’s work, not our work. To do that we first need to distinguish sanctification from good works,

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3 LW 41:114-15 (On the Councils and the Church, 1539; trans. alt.).
where sanctification is God’s work in us and the good works that follow are the works we do in cooperation with God in the power of the Spirit.

I want to develop three points made by the Danish theologian Regin Prenter (60 years ago) in an article on the evangelical concept of sanctification. He highlights the distinctive characteristics of the true evangelical or Lutheran way of preaching sanctification.

First, sanctification is Christ's work, not ours. Even better, it is the work of the triune God, for it is the Father who sanctifies us through Christ in the Spirit. Sanctification is not something that we do but something that is done to us. Luther uses the term “passive holiness to describe this. We could also call it receptive holiness. It means that we are passive and God is the actor. Once we are sanctified we cooperate with God, we work with Christ. But it is never an equal partnership; he is always the one who takes the lead, and it is only by the grace of God and the power of the Spirit that we can begin to work along with Christ by allowing him to be the Lord of our life in all its totality and not just part of our life. By ourselves we can do nothing, even as Christians; Paul says that there is nothing that we have that we did not receive (1 Cor 4:7). So it is not we but the triune God who is the main actor in sanctification. Luther says much the same thing in his explanation to the Third Article in his Small Catechism. You remember how he begins: “I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and kept me in true faith.” So again, God is the active subject in sanctification and we are the recipients.

But sanctification is understood very differently in American Evangelicalism. I distinctly remember hearing a Baptist preacher when I was in the states doing my doctoral studies in the early 1990s. He said God has done everything for us: he has saved us, he has reconciled us to God, he has atoned for our sins, he has forgiven us. Now, he said, it is over to you. You must take responsibility for the way your live out your life. God has given you the road map in the Holy Scriptures and he has given you his Spirit. The rest is up to you. Justification is God’s work, sanctification is your work. This however is the complete opposite to the Lutheran view. Our most important “work” is to let God do his work without blocking him;

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our work is to submit to Christ and to let him be Lord of our life; our task is to let the Spirit transform us and to conform us to the image of Christ. If we preach sanctification as something that we do, we do not make people holy but we end up making them rely on themselves and their own works—and that is the opposite of holiness.

Oswald Bayer says that sanctification is really nothing more than justification. They are two sides of the same coin. So we should speak about sanctification in the same way as we speak about justification. Just as in justification we say that we are passive and receive the gift of imputed righteousness along with the gift of the indwelling Christ in the Spirit, so too in sanctification we say that we are passive and receive the gift of God’s holiness.

The question could be asked: whose holiness is it, ours or Christ’s? Likewise in justification, whose righteousness is it, our or Christ’s? Lutherans have always stressed that it is first and foremost Christ’s righteousness that is imputed to us in justification and Christ’s holiness that is given to us in sanctification. Hence Luther’s talk of “passive holiness” or CS Lewis’s phrase “borrowed holiness”. However, Luther teaches us that whatever belongs to Christ he shares with us. To stress this point he can use nuptial imagery to talk about the Christian life in which Christ is the bridegroom and the church is his bride, and everything that he has he shares us her. Please note in passing that when we consider sanctification, it is important to speak corporately and not just individually. In other words, although it is not wrong to speak about the marriage bond between Christ and the Christian, we must never do this to the exclusion of the church. Another way of expressing the close bond between Christ and the Christian is to speak of our union in Christ. Those of you who are familiar with the new Finnish Luther research will know that the term “union with Christ” is one the ways that they propose for overcoming the separation between justification and sanctification that has sometimes crept into the Lutheran tradition. Through union with Christ, Christ’s own righteousness, which he imputes to us in justification actually becomes ours in sanctification when Christ comes to dwell within us through the Spirit.

This is a big topic which we may be able to come back to in discussion, but the point I want to make here is that Christ’s righteousness and holiness is not just imputed to us but it actually starts to become ours through union with Christ in the Spirit. This is an incredibly important point that is already there in Luther but is being discovered anew today and
stands at the centre of the Finnish Luther interpretation and the Lutheran—Roman Catholic agreement on justification. Unless we stress this, justification and sanctification fall apart, as in the case of the antinomianism of Luther’s day. I will say more about this later.

As I said before, Bayer and others argue that sanctification is really nothing more than justification. If in fact they are simply two different ways of looking at the same reality, then in preaching sanctification we should be leading people in the same direction as we do when we preach the forgiveness of sins. All preaching should ultimately lead people in the one direction, and that is to Christ. All true Christian preaching leads people away from themselves to Christ. Prenter beautifully says that it is the same in sanctification: “We lead people away from their own helplessness and defeat, but also away from their own power and victories, to the Bread of Life, the living, active, uplifting Christ. Only preaching that leads people to Christ is Christian preaching. If we speak of sanctification in such a way as to lead people away from the atoning Christ to their own piety, their own efforts, their own decisions, or their own progress, this is not Christian preaching.”

So the first point I’ve been making is that sanctification is the work of the triune God and that all preaching of sanctification must lead to Christ. This emphasis is fundamental to the Lutheran understanding of sanctification and the preaching of sanctification.

The second of Prenter’s three main points is that sanctification must be preached as gospel and not as law. That is not to say that we should not preach law. We must preach the law in a concrete way that addresses people’s idolatry at its deepest level for unless people hear the law they will not listen to gospel. But Prenter insists that the preaching of the law, necessary as it is, is still not a preaching of sanctification. The proclamation of God’s demands cannot make a person holy because sanctification is God’s work and not our work.

We need to remember however that there are two ways in which the law or commandment can be heard: one is as accusing and threatening law which demands that we do what it says or else! This is what Prenter has in mind, because he says that God’s demands call for our works and that to attempt to be holy by our own works is the height of sin. However, what Prenter has forgotten about is that, as Christians, we receive the law as gift. We do not try to keep the commandments in order to become holy because we are already holy through baptism and faith in Christ. We keep the commandments out of gratitude for God’s gift of
redemption and out of love for the neighbour. That is not sin but is the will of God. He calls us to obey the law and empowers us to do so with his Spirit. And having been renewed in heart and mind, keeping the commandments is the very thing that we want to do. Therefore, I would argue that we cannot simply say that the gospel alone sanctifies for in the Christian life law and gospel work together rather than in opposition. Therefore, I think that it would be more accurate to say that we are sanctified by the word of God which includes the gospel but does not exclude the law in the sense of God’s command.

The third point Prenter makes is that the content of sanctification is Christ. Here I believe he is perfectly correct. I said earlier that Luther said to the antinomians of his day that they were strong on preaching justification or forgiveness but weak on preaching sanctification or the cessation of sin, the ceasing of sin in one’s life or the sweeping out of sin. There is often confusion among Christians on this point so let me explain what Luther means by the sweeping out of sin. It certainly does NOT mean that the Christian is free from sin or has no sin. But sin should no longer control the Christian because sin no longer masters us but we master sin by the power of the Spirit. Luther’s point is that it’s not enough to say that we are forgiven through faith in Christ; we also need to be able to say that Christ puts an end to sin in our life, that he is the conqueror of our own personal sin as he asserts his lordship in our life. But, as I said, this does not mean that we are without sin. The important thing is that we continue to struggle against sin and do not let it get the upper hand. And because we are always struggling against sin we become more and more conscious of just how sinful we are. Let me repeat this because it is an important paradox. The more Christians grow in sanctification the more they will be aware of sin in their life. Let me say that again: The more Christians grow in sanctification, the more they will be aware of sin in their life, not the less.

Where Christians think that sanctification is their own work, and that they self-consciously set about growing in holiness and piety, they will say that they are less and less aware of sin in their life. They will be proud of how they are really getting on top of their sin—of course they’ll say with the Spirit’s help—but they will see it as basically their own doing, their achievement. They might even start comparing themselves with others and boast of the fact that they are better and more holy because they do this or refrain from doing that. But this is spiritual pride and it has no place in genuine evangelical, gospel-based sanctification. Where the triune God is the one who sanctifies and Christ is the true content of
sanctification, then the more we grow in Christ, the more we see ourselves as the sinners we really are, AND at the same time the more we throw ourselves on God’s mercy and cling to Christ as our only Saviour.

It follows from this that progress in sanctification must be understood in this same paradoxical way. Luther says that real progress in the Christian life is going backwards rather than going forwards. It means returning to our baptism and claiming its promises through the daily crucifixion of the old Adam. If God is the real author, the real actor in sanctification, then that means that any progress in the Christian life is going to be God’s action and not ours.

Let us look further at how we should understand the idea of “progress” in the Christian life? In some churches, progress in faith is named as one of the marks of sanctification? What exactly is meant by progress in sanctification? Is there a place for Lutheran theology to speak of growing in holiness? There is, as long as we distinguish between two ways of seeing holiness: one before God (coram Deo); the other before people (coram hominibus). Before God, we cannot be any more holy than we are when we are justified by faith and have Christ’s holiness imputed to us. We are 100% holy through Baptism and faith in Christ. It is God’s gift to us and, as such, is perfect and complete. However, this gift of perfect holiness, this borrowed holiness that we have by faith is hidden from our eyes and seen only by God. All that we see and everyone else sees is our own imperfect holiness (coram hominibus). When we speak of progressing in holiness, we mean becoming more in ourselves what we already are in Christ. Hence, so long as we distinguish this progressive holiness from our positional holiness (Christ’s holiness which is imputed to us), which is already perfect and constitutes the ground for standing in the presence of the holy God, we can speak of “progress” in the Christian life.

Luther too can talk about progress because for him it has nothing to do with salvation but everything to do with ethics. It has to do with everyday service of the neighbour in the world in station and vocation. That’s his way of saying that you live out the Christian life in service to the neighbour especially in those places of responsibility where we serve others – the household or family, the church or congregation, and the civil realm or the state.
This “progress” of the Christian life in service of the neighbour is part of our sanctification. It belongs to the good works that we do as Christians. But these good works are not something that we should be aware of—and if we are conscious of them, or doing them to get praise, then we are doing them for the wrong reason. The Dutch theologian Kohlbrugge once said that Christians wear their fruit on their backs, they can’t see it but others can. On the other hand, because we remain sinners as long as we live, our motives will never be pure. Lutheran ethics at this point says don’t start analysing your motives, just do what you know you have to do, what God calls you to do, irrespective of how you feel; do whatever you know that your calling and station in life requires you to do, and do it to the best of your ability, irrespective of whether you do it cheerfully or grudgingly—and let God take care of the motive. And how does God take care of it—by forgiving it. If we act in faith, everything we do is covered by God’s forgiveness. And that finally is what makes our deeds good: they are forgiven. That’s what makes our works good works.

Doing good works, serving your neighbour, caring for your family, raising your children, being a good citizen, paying your bill, serving your employer honestly by doing a fair day’s work, also going to church—all of these things belong to what the Lutheran confessions call the new obedience. They are the fruit of faith. Just like a tree produces fruit, so faith produces good works. It happens spontaneously; and if it doesn’t, because the old sinful nature is blocking it, then we need to hear a word of law that tells us that we should get on and do what we know we must do—for the sake of the neighbour. It’s all about the neighbour, not about us. And when we serve the neighbour and live as good, responsible citizens and contribute to the good of the family, church, and society, then God gets the glory. However, he doesn’t need our good works, but our neighbour does.

This is the new obedience of the Christian life. It is not motivated by any attempt to win God’s favour through what we do but is simply done for the good of the neighbour. So when Luther speaks of progress in holiness and righteousness, he is not speaking about justification or earning salvation but he is talking about the new obedience of faith which is always active in love. He makes this clear in his *Large Catechism* (the explanation to the Third Article of the Creed) where he attributes the growth and holiness of the Christian life to the work of the Holy Spirit. Let me read from the Large Catechism:
Since holiness has already started in the Christian community and is growing every day, we are waiting for the old nature to be put to death with all its filth. Only then will it emerge in all its radiance, and rise from death, to complete and utter holiness in a new life that lasts for ever. For the time being, we are only half clean and holy. So the Holy Spirit has to keep on working at us through God’s word and to hand out forgiveness every day. He goes on doing this until that life starts where there will be no forgiveness anymore. Instead, there will only be people who are completely clean and holy, utterly good and perfect in God’s eyes and free of sin, death, and all trouble, with new radiant bodies that can never die. So you see, all this is the Holy Spirit’s function and task: to get holiness started here on earth, and make it grow every day.\footnote{Luther’s Large Catechism, Anniversary Translation and Introductory Essay by Friedemann Hebart (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1983), 123f.}

Luther speaks about growing in holiness as a fruit of faith, but this imperfect growth in holiness can never be the basis for confidence before God. Our certainty of salvation is based solely on God the Father’s redemptive work in Christ mediated by the Spirit that we receive through faith in the promise.

It is useful to note that Lutherans and the Reformed differ in the way in which they use the law in relation to progress. The Reformed tend to use the law to measure how far they have progressed in Christian discipleship. Lutherans, on the other hand, tend to use the law to remind them of how far they fall short of God’s standards, how little progress they have made in holiness of life, and how much they need to depend on God’s mercy. From the Lutheran perspective, the risk of the Reformed view is spiritual pride, judgmentalism, and the temptation to compare yourself with others especially if it to your advantage.

The “Lutheran” problem, on the other hand, is that we have allowed the gospel of God’s forgiveness to lull us into complacency so that we do not give much thought to Jesus’ call to discipleship, to keeping the commandments, observing the precepts, injunctions, admonitions of Scripture. In a nutshell, we tend not to be as concerned as we should be about progress in holiness of living and in doing good works.

The only way to address this problem is to teach people that the gospel is meant to bear fruit in our lives and that this work is the fruit of faith. James, of course, says that if there is
no fruit, no good works in your life, then your faith is dead. And the only way to bring dead faith to life is to return to Baptism, where the Christian life begins and through repentance to drink deeply from the wellspring of life with the prayer that the Holy Spirit would rekindle faith in your heart and fill you with God’s empowering Spirit.