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Table of Contents

Luther’s “September” New Testament of 1522

Cameron A. MacKenzie 193

Reinhold Pieper’s Strictly Textual Preaching: Proclaiming Law and Gospel in Accordance with Scripture

Isaac R. W. Johnson 217

The Adiaphorist Controversy and FC X’s Teaching on the Church and Temporal Authority

Christian J. Einertson 235

Taking Care of the Body of Jesus: Towards a Biblical Theology of Suffering

Arthur A. Just Jr. 251

What’s Old Is New Again: The Art of *Seelsorge*

Harold L. Senkbeil 265

“You Are Not Your Own. . . . So Glorify God in Your Body”

Walter A. Maier III 275

Bane and Blessing: Assessing the Liturgical Impact of Vatican II at Its Diamond Jubilee

Thomas M. Winger 295

<i>Spirituales Motus: Sanctification and Spiritual Movements in Believers</i>	
Gifford A. Grobien	315
What Happens If We Say Two Plus Two Makes Five?	
The Role of Wisdom and Creation in Matters of Salvation	
Peter J. Scaer	333
Research Note	353
On the Numbering and Teaching of the Decalogue	
Theological Observer	359
Funeral Sermon for Jordan Louis Scaer	
Ancient Creation?	
2 Corinthians 5:20: Ambassadors for Christ	
Social Media and the Christian Church	
Book Review	375
Books Received	377
Indices to Volume 87 (2023)	379

Spirituales Motus: Sanctification and Spiritual Movements in Believers

Gifford A. Grobien

One of the ways the Lutheran Confessions address true good works is by reference to new spiritual movements or inclinations in believers. Spiritual movements are powers and inclinations of the Christian, caused by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, which indicate God’s favor, indwelling, and work, and which produce distinctively Christian works related to humility, love, and concord.¹ In this essay, I will describe these spiritual movements, consider their meaning anthropologically, and address some questions regarding sanctification and growth in holiness. Understanding spiritual movements is crucial if we are to understand the fullness of the Lutheran confession of the work of the Holy Spirit, give hope to people struggling with sin, and have an answer to the perennial charge of antinomianism and laxity that our opponents cast against our confession and church.

Describing Spiritual Movements

The concept of spiritual movements in Christians—new movements not previously experienced while unregenerate—is expressed primarily in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, although it is first referred to in AC XVIII and reiterated in the Solid Declaration.² The Apology discusses them primarily in the section on

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, quotations of the Book of Concord are from W. H. T. Dau and F. Bente, eds., *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church, German-Latin-English* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921). Hereafter, Dau and Bente.

² “Nature . . . is unable to produce the interior movements, such as the fear of God, faith toward God, chastity, patience, etc.” (AC XVIII 9, my translation). Four times the Apology refers to spiritual movements in Article IV (III), paragraphs 124–125 (3–4). References to spiritual movements also occur in Ap II 35; Ap IV (III) 136, 171, 175, 250, and 352 (15, 50, 54, 129, and 231); and Ap XXIV 26. AC XX says that the heart is endowed with *novos affectus* so that it is possible to bring forth good works (29). The German Book of Concord rarely uses the general term “movements” (*Bewegungen*, only in FC SD II 70, 89), but refers to such movements concretely, as specific virtues and acts coming from the regenerate heart. So, for example, through faith we “increase in the Spirit . . . so that we shall rightly fear and love God from the bottom of our hearts” (Ap IV [III] 124 [3], my translation), and faith renews and changes the heart “so we begin to fear God, to love, to thank him, to praise him, to ask and expect all help from him, and also to be obedient to him according to his will in all tribulation . . . [T]here is now within, through the Spirit of Christ, a new heart, mind, and soul” (Ap IV [III] 125 [4], my translation). The Solid Declaration uses the terms “virtue” (*Tugend/virtus* [II 24, 71; III 35; XI 73]) or “power” (*Kraft/vis* [II 65; IV 10]) as well.

Christian love and the fulfilling of the law in relation to justification. It is concerned, on the one hand, to distinguish carefully justification from good works, yet, on the other hand, to iterate that Christians perform good works out of faith and the renewal of the Holy Spirit:

[T]he Law ought to be begun in us, and be kept by us more and more. Moreover, we speak not of ceremonies, but of that Law which gives commandment concerning the movements of the heart, namely, the Decalog. Because, indeed, faith brings the Holy Ghost, and produces in hearts a new life, it is necessary that it should produce spiritual movements in hearts. And what these movements are, the prophet, Jer. 31:33 shows, when he says: I will put My Law into their inward parts, and write it in their hearts. Therefore, when we have been justified by faith and regenerated, we begin to fear and love God, to pray to Him, to expect from Him aid, to give thanks and praise Him, and to obey Him in afflictions. We begin also to love our neighbors, because our hearts have spiritual and holy movements. (Ap IV [III] 124–125 [3–4])³

First, the Apology confesses that the law ought to be kept by the justified, and thus to increase in the Spirit (Ap IV [III] 124 [3]). Such keeping of the law, however, refers not to ceremonies (Ap IV [III] 124 [3]), mere outward actions (AC XVIII), or works performed *ex opere operato* (Ap XIV 3 [26]), but to the power and actions of the heart, those works that truly are commanded by the Decalogue.

Such actions result from a heart changed from a spiritually corrupt heart controlled only by original sin to a new heart, regenerate, with some ability to work against the corruption of original sin (Rom 7:25; FC SD II 63–64). The justified person is able to begin to do interior good works because faith brings with it the Holy Spirit and new life. Faith “necessarily” produces these new movements and works (Ap IV [III] 250 [129]).

An important distinction is to be made between outward, natural works of civil righteousness and “those things which belong peculiarly to the divine Law,” that is, “the affections of the heart towards God” which “cannot be rendered without the Holy Ghost” (Ap IV [III] 130 [9]).⁴ At the same time, good works include both the works of the heart and also external works. The fundamental difference between mere natural, civil works and good external works is that “the heart must enter into these works, lest they be mere, lifeless, cold works of hypocrites” (German Ap IV [III] 136 [15]).⁵ Furthermore, note that good works are done not only with respect to other men, but also in relation to God, with respect to worship; truly good works

³ Dau and Bente, 157.

⁴ Dau and Bente, 157.

⁵ Dau and Bente, 159.

are not limited to the love of neighbor. Slogans such as “God doesn’t want your good works” undermine the testimony of the Confessions in this matter. Other than the object of the act itself, the true difference between good and evil works is the condition of the heart, not with whom one relates in the work.

Therefore, when the Apology refers to new, spiritual, or holy movements, it means powers and actions of the regenerate heart, mind, and soul, and, as regenerate, distinguished from natural, civil works of the unregenerate, which are hypocritical in that they do not reflect the condition of the actual soul of the person doing them.

Ontology or Ascription?

Are these spiritual movements *ontological* or *ascriptive*? By ontological, I am not referring to any specific ontology or philosophical school. I am merely asking if the terms refer to the nature of the human heart and soul. Are these movements attributes characteristic of the regenerate heart, expressions of its being? Or, is the confessional language merely ascriptive, that is, stating how the heart is viewed or judged by God, but not actually describing its nature?

There is nothing in the semantics of the terms or context of these passages to suggest an ascriptive meaning. The context is regeneration, that is, new life and renewal. The Apology expects the believer to do good works, to fulfill the law, to love. Good works are actions taken toward others which are either perceptible to the senses or to one’s spirit. A human action is of the will and is characterized by the nature of the will, either good or bad. A bad will does not produce works which are bad but are nevertheless spiritually ascribed or labeled as good. There are imperfect good works in which a Christian is nevertheless declared fully righteous on account of Christ, but the works themselves are not simply evil. They are conducted out of an incipient, impure, and incomplete righteousness of sanctification (FC SD III 32). There is a real righteousness here that has begun in the believer.

Per Apology IV, the Christian is only able to do this because, anthropologically, the Holy Spirit through faith has created new life in the heart, so that the Christian has a new mind and spirit which produce good works (German Ap IV [III] 125, 129 [4, 8]). Solid Declaration IV confesses that faith makes Christians “entirely different men in heart, spirit, mind and all powers” (Luther, quoted in FC SD IV 10).⁶ Other articles iterate the same teaching, even when explicitly addressing the question of original sin. Apology II confesses that the Holy Spirit begins “to mortify the concupiscence, and creates new movements in man” (Ap II 35).⁷ Solid Declaration II

⁶ Dau and Bente, 941.

⁷ Dau and Bente, 115.

confesses that “God in conversion changes stubborn and unwilling into willing men through the drawing of the Holy Ghost, and that after such conversion, in the daily exercise of repentance, the regenerate will of man is not idle, but also cooperates in all the works of the Holy Ghost which He does through us” (FC SD II 88).⁸ Here the change is explicitly not a mere verdict or designation, but the man himself is changed, after which he also cooperates with the Holy Spirit.

We recognize further that the Christian cooperates with the Holy Spirit in doing these good works not by natural powers, but from the “powers and gifts” given by the Holy Spirit in regeneration. Such powers and gifts remain only so long as the Holy Spirit rules, guides, and leads the Christian, which is only so long as the person has faith (FC SD II 65–66). Yet these powers and gifts are not simply powers of the Holy Spirit and his activity operating through Christians, as though they were inanimate, unwilling, unreflective instruments (FC SD II 60). After all, what can “cooperate” mean if the new movements are solely the work of the Holy Spirit? If the Holy Spirit alone operates in a man, in such a way that the man is merely an instrument, an inanimate tool puppeted by the Holy Spirit, then the Formula could not speak of a believer cooperating, working with the Holy Spirit. A man cooperates by using his own converted will and understanding. To be sure, he does this not from natural powers, but from the “powers and gifts” given by the Holy Spirit in regeneration. Only so long as the Holy Spirit does rule, guide, and lead him, can he be said to have a free will.⁹ Nevertheless, he cooperates just the same. Either the Holy Spirit alone is the subject, working the work, or the believer also is a subject, working with the Holy Spirit, albeit surely from a much weaker, more dependent stance. The Confessions could not speak of cooperation apart from some regenerate subjectivity on the part of the believer.

One might offer as a counter-argument the following passage from the Solid Declaration: “[A]lthough the regenerate even in this life advance so far that they will what is good, and love it, and even do good and grow in it, nevertheless this (as above stated) is not of our will and ability, but the Holy Ghost . . . works such willing and doing” (FC SD II 39).¹⁰ What are we to make of this in light of other passages in the very same article, which confess that the will is renewed, knows and desires what is good, works to do good, and cooperates with the Holy Spirit?

This passage says that the advancement of the regenerate “is not of our will and ability, but the Holy Ghost . . . works such willing and doing,” that is, “nicht aus

⁸ Dau and Bente, 915. Nor are conversion and regeneration a new creation *ex nihilo*, as though the old man is destroyed and “a new essence of the soul is created out of nothing” (FC SD II 81; Dau and Bente, 911).

⁹ See details in FC SD II 60, 63–67, 70.

¹⁰ Dau and Bente, 895.

unserm Willen und unserm Vermögen, sondern der Heilige Geist . . . wirkt solch Wollen und Vollbringen” or “non *a* nostra voluntate aut *a* viribus nostris profiscitur, sed Spiritus Sanctus . . . operatur in nobis illud velle et perficere.” Both the German *aus* and the Latin *a* are prepositions of source and direction, which the English “of” does not always capture. It may have been more accurate to translate that the advancement of the regenerate occurs “not out of our will and ability,” or “not from our will and ability.” The passage goes on to say that the Holy Spirit works the Christian’s willing and doing, that is, the Holy Spirit is the source of the regenerate person’s desiring and acting in accordance with the good. Or, the Holy Spirit is the source and cause of a person having a free will and movements. Yet, by the Holy Spirit, a person has a free will and movements to act well.

When we consider the context of the arguments in FC SD II, this conclusion is supported. Paragraph 39, which states that the activity of the regenerate is “not of our will and ability, but the Holy Ghost . . . works,” comes in the section discussing the fallen will of man prior to regeneration. Even though the passage briefly mentions regeneration and the actions of a regenerate man, the purpose of the section is to emphasize the Holy Spirit’s work alone in justifying and sanctifying. The argument being made here is that an unregenerate man can do nothing out of his natural power to cause himself truly to will and to act righteously. Only the Holy Spirit can give such a will and movements.

The other passages already referred to earlier come in a later section of FC SD II (roughly paragraphs 58–72) which refers to the will of the person made regenerate by the Holy Spirit. It is in this context, that of a person already justified and made alive by the Holy Spirit, that the article speaks of the freedom of the will, new movements, and exertion to do good. Thus we can understand FC SD II as confessing that no powers of natural man contribute to justification or regeneration, while the newly created spiritual powers and movements of the Holy Spirit in the mind and will of the believer do cooperate with the Spirit to do good works.

This is clear especially from FC SD II 63:

But when man has been converted, and is thus enlightened, and his will is renewed, it is then that man wills what is good (so far as he is regenerate or a new man), and delights in the Law of God after the inward man, Rom. 7:22, and henceforth does good to such an extent and as long as he is impelled by God’s Spirit. . . . And this impulse of the Holy Ghost is not a *coactio*, or coercion, but the converted man does good spontaneously.¹¹

It is only the renewed will that does good, not the natural will. The renewal itself is not “out of” the natural powers, but the Holy Spirit alone. Nevertheless, once re-

¹¹ Dau and Bente, 905.

newed, the Holy Spirit does not coerce, but the converted man does good spontaneously, according to the human way of willing and doing.¹² The newness of the believer from this perspective is not merely ascriptive, but it is ontological: of the nature of the believer because of the effects of faith in him. He is consoled, has the Holy Spirit, and begins to love God and neighbor with a renewed mind, heart, and will.¹³

To emphasize the point, the Solid Declaration asserts that without a change to the faculties, a person is not converted: “[I]t is manifest that where no change whatever in the intellect, will, and heart occurs through the Holy Ghost to that which is good . . . there no conversion takes place” (FC SD II 83).¹⁴ The converted person experiences an anthropological change in which he begins to know and desire God’s good will.

This distinction between the powers of the natural man and what the Holy Spirit makes a person through regeneration and his gifts is apparent also in SA III III. In this article, Luther is contrasting what some imagine they may bring in repentance to contribute to the satisfaction of sins before God. Luther asserts:

[R]epentance is not piecemeal and beggarly, like that which does penance for actual sins, nor is it uncertain like that. For it does not debate what is or is not sin, but hurls everything on a heap, and says: All in us is nothing but sin. What is the use of investigating, dividing, or distinguishing a long time? For this reason, too, this contrition is not uncertain. For there is nothing left with which

¹² For more on the *modus agendi* see FC SD II 61–62, and also 89–90: “So also when Luther says that with respect to his conversion man is *pure passive* . . . his meaning is not that . . . in conversion no new emotion whatever is awakened in us by the Holy Ghost and no spiritual operation begun; but he means that man of himself, or from his natural powers, cannot do anything or help towards his conversion . . . [T]he intellect and will of the unregenerate man are nothing else than *subiectum convertendum*, that is, that which is to be converted, it being the intellect and will of a spiritually dead man, in whom the Holy Ghost works conversion and renewal, towards which work man’s will that is to be converted does nothing, but suffers God alone to work in him, until he is regenerate; and then he works also with the Holy Ghost that which is pleasing to God in other good works that follow” (Dau and Bente, 915).

¹³ “[B]ecause it receives the remission of sins, and reconciles us to God, by this faith we are [like Abraham] accounted righteous for Christ’s sake before we love and do the works of the Law, although love necessarily follows. Nor, indeed, is this faith an idle knowledge, neither can it coexist with mortal sin, but it is a work of the Holy Ghost, whereby we are freed from death, and terrified minds are encouraged and quickened. And because this faith alone receives the remission of sins, and renders us acceptable to God, and brings the Holy Ghost, it could be more correctly called *gratia gratum faciens*, grace rendering one pleasing to God, than an effect following, namely, love. Thus far, in order that the subject might be made quite clear, we have shown with sufficient fulness, both from testimonies of Scripture, and arguments derived from Scripture, that by faith alone we obtain the remission of sins for Christ’s sake, and that by faith alone we are justified, i.e., of unrighteous men made righteous, or regenerated” (Ap IV [II] 114–117; Dau and Bente, 155).

¹⁴ Dau and Bente, 913.

we can think of any good thing to pay for sin, but there is only a sure despairing concerning all that we are, think, speak, or do, etc.

In like manner confession, too, cannot be false, uncertain, or piecemeal. For he who confesses that all in him is nothing but sin comprehends all sins, excludes none, forgets none. Neither can the satisfaction be uncertain, because it is not our uncertain, sinful work, but it is the suffering and blood of the innocent Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world. (SA III III 36–38)¹⁵

Luther is speaking about repentance, not about good works. When it comes to repentance, the contrition and faith which receives the forgiveness of sins, there is indeed nothing in a person himself which contributes to forgiveness or satisfaction. Contrition, confession, and satisfaction are unable to pick out works here or there by which one could claim righteousness, but rather acknowledge wholly one's guilt before God, the comprehensive character of confession, and the utter dependence on satisfaction outside of oneself, that is, in the merits of Christ. There is nothing in one's works, nature, or character which contributes any part to reconciliation with God.

Furthermore, sin remains in Christians and continually needs to be forgiven. When it comes to satisfaction or forgiveness at any point in the Christian life, works contribute nothing. The flesh of original sin lusts against the Spirit and against the new man regenerated by the Spirit (Ap IV [III] 168–171 [47–50]). A Christian prior to his death never reaches perfection, and all of his good works are imperfect and need the continued imputation of Christ's righteousness before God. Beginning to fulfill the law does not please on its own, but according to the continuous forgiveness of sin and merit of Christ (Ap IV [III] 166–169 [45–48]).

Yet even in SA III III, Luther recognizes the work of the Spirit to bring regeneration, to change a person, and to bring forth good works in a Christian, not for the satisfaction of sin, but simply as the fruit and result of forgiveness: "Paul, Rom. 7:14–25, testifies that he wars with the law in his members, etc.; and that, not by his own powers, but by the gift of the Holy Ghost that follows the remission of sins. This gift daily cleanses and sweeps out the remaining sins, and works so as to render man truly pure and holy" (SA III III 40).¹⁶ Regeneration itself depends on the presence, power, and gifts of the Spirit, has no basis in the powers of natural man, and follows upon the forgiveness of sins, contributing nothing to it. Yet in regeneration we see here also that the Holy Spirit dwells in the heart to cleanse, purify, and sanctify. Such cleansing and purification compares to the Spirit's contention with concupiscence,

¹⁵ Dau and Bente, 489.

¹⁶ Dau and Bente, 489.

mortification of evil lusts, and purification “to produce new spiritual movements” (Ap IV [III] 170–171 [49–50]).¹⁷

The Relation of Good Works to Sanctification

If there is unease or confusion about new movements in believers as an anthropological change, perhaps consideration of the relationship between good works and sanctification will help to clarify. It is common both among dogmaticians and popularly among Christians to equate sanctification with good works. Indeed, Pieper’s narrow definition of sanctification refers to the good works and renewal of the regenerate Christian apart from justification.¹⁸ Formula III also makes this statement in several places: sanctification is renewal, not part of justification, and includes instruction on love and good works (FC SD III 28–29); renewal, sanctification, love, virtue, and good works are not to be mixed with justification (FC SD III 35, 39). The concern in the Confessions and traditionally among the dogmaticians is that people not confuse the effects (fruits and love) with the cause nor mistakenly teach that an effect justifies (Ap IV [III] 145 [24]). Rather, upon justification through faith, the believer begins to fulfill the law. Sanctification and justification must be distinguished from each other.

Yet the biblical language of sanctification, and the language of the Confessions in other places, while distinguishing sanctification from justification, does not separate them from each other. In Exodus and Leviticus, for example, sanctification is parallel to or equated with consecration, or being set apart from the secular or profane, which in turn is associated with atonement, purification, and forgiveness. The New Testament continues this line of thinking, with sanctification typically referring generally to the work of the Holy Spirit setting apart the church and the Christian, whether for forgiveness, purification, consecrating, doing good works, or perfecting.

That sanctification does not refer simply and only to good works is perhaps most obvious in the explanation of the Third Article of the Creed in the Large Catechism. Luther begins simply and literally, stating that the Holy Spirit “makes holy” (LC II 35). The Spirit does this by the church, by forgiveness, by resurrection, and by eternal life, the things confessed in the Third Article. Focusing on our present life in the world, sanctification refers to gathering in the holy congregation where Christ is preached (LC II 37). In the believer, sanctification includes knowledge and faith, by which Christians are brought to Christ and receive his goods (38–42).

¹⁷ Dau and Bente, 171.

¹⁸ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, trans. Walter W. F. Albrecht, vol. 3 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 3–5.

Sanctification includes clinging to and persevering in the church. Because the church itself is gathered in the first place by preaching (45), sanctification includes the Holy Spirit's work in the office of the ministry to present the means of grace to the church. The word and the means of grace cause the church "daily to grow and become strong in the faith and its fruits which He produces" (LC II 53).¹⁹ Here, while there is distinction between faith and the fruits of faith, they are grouped together without any separation as effects of sanctification.

In contrast to the Formula and later dogmaticians, the Large Catechism makes very little effort to separate sanctification from justification, as though justification occurred prior to and under different operations from sanctification. Rather, the Large Catechism places justification as the creation and strengthening of faith within the broader work of sanctification, which includes also the fruits of faith.

One might argue that the strengthening of faith differs from the beginning of faith, and since the beginning of faith, when a person is first consoled from the terror of the law, is justification, justification is still excluded from sanctification here as the beginning of faith versus the ongoing strengthening of faith, which could be interpreted simply for the effects or fruits of faith, that is, love. However, the Large Catechism argues differently. It continues with the argument that sanctification includes the ongoing forgiveness of sins through preaching, the sacraments, and the ministry. Such ongoing forgiveness is necessary because people—including Christians—are never without sin (LC II 54–55). Justification as receiving the forgiveness of sin is an ongoing work of God included under the ongoing work of sanctification in the church.

The Large Catechism confesses also that the Holy Spirit "daily increases holiness upon earth by means of . . . the Christian Church and the forgiveness of sins" (LC II 59)²⁰ and considers this increase in holiness part of sanctification. Increase in holiness is a fruit of ongoing forgiveness. Both justification and increasing holiness fall under the broader rubric of sanctification. Increase in holiness, nevertheless, remains only partial, to be completed in the resurrection when Christians will "rise to perfection" (LC II 57–58).²¹

From this discussion, we see that the Large Catechism holds the broad understanding of sanctification, which includes everything the Holy Spirit does to call and keep a Christian unto salvation in the church, as is succinctly stated in the Small Catechism. This broad definition is also recognized by Pieper.²²

¹⁹ Dau and Bente, 693.

²⁰ Dau and Bente, 693–695.

²¹ Dau and Bente, 693.

²² Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 3:4. See also the Apology, which confesses that the Holy Spirit grants to us Christ, the forgiveness of sins, justification, "eternal life, eternal righteousness," "to

As an aside, we should note here the danger of sayings such as “[s]anctification is . . . *the art of getting used to justification*,” when such sayings suggest that sanctification is no different from justification.²³ The Confessions teach that sanctification is more than justification, even if it includes it. To say that sanctification is simply getting used to justification either reduces sanctification to justification, and says nothing about the consecration, renewal, keeping, and perfection of the Holy Spirit, or it makes justification equal to sanctification, and confuses the righteousness of faith with renewal and its fruits.

We do, nevertheless, confess that sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit, regardless of whether we consider the narrow or broad definition. Even sanctification narrowly speaking is the renewing work of the Holy Spirit, the regeneration and strengthening of the new mind, will, and powers—spiritual movements. Good works are the *fruit* and *effect* of sanctification, done in cooperation by the Christian with the Holy Spirit wherein a Christian acts willingly in accordance with the renewal and movements of the Holy Spirit. For example, the Solid Declaration states that after justification a person is renewed and sanctified, “from which renewal and sanctification the fruits of good works then follow” (FC SD III 41).²⁴ The Solid Declaration (FC SD III 21) further refers the reader to Luther’s *On the Councils and the Church* (1539) for further explanation of the relationship between justification and sanctification. In this work, Luther ties the sanctification of renewal intimately with justification: “[T]he Holy Spirit gives people faith in Christ and thus sanctifies them, Acts 15 [:9], that is, he renews heart, soul, body, work, and conduct, inscribing the commandments of God not on tables of stone, but in hearts of flesh, 2 Corinthians 3 [:3].”²⁵ Luther goes on to say that works themselves are done as fruits of this renewed man.

Sanctification is not simply the doing of good works. Rather, it is everything the Holy Spirit does to bring and keep a person in the church, cause him to grow in holiness, and perfect him in the resurrection and life everlasting. Whether we are speaking of sanctification broadly or narrowly, both definitions ought to be distinguished from good works, strictly speaking, because sanctification is more than good works. However, when sanctification is seen simply as equivalent to good works, and when

manifest Christ in our hearts,” and to work “other gifts, love, thanksgiving, charity, patience, etc.” (Ap IV [III] 132 [11]; Dau and Bente, 159).

²³ Gerhard Forde, “The Lutheran View,” in *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, ed. Donald L. Alexander (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 13, emphasis in original.

²⁴ Dau and Bente, 929.

²⁵ Martin Luther, *On the Councils and the Church* (1539), vol. 41, p. 145, in *Luther’s Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–), hereafter AE.

sanctification is rightly seen as the work of the Holy Spirit, Christians may mistakenly conclude that good works are simply the work of the Holy Spirit, and no purpose or exertion should be directed toward good works in the Christian life. However, as we have seen from the Confessions, good works are worked by the free, renewed will, mind, and heart of the Christian in cooperation with the Holy Spirit.

Progressive Sanctification

Another concern may surround the question of progressive sanctification. If a regenerate man actually changes anthropologically, and is to exert himself in good works, then should he also progress, grow, or improve in his good works? As already noted, although the regenerate have spiritual, holy movements, they also are far distant from perfection according to the law (Ap IV [III] 175 [54]). “For now we are only half pure and holy, so that the Holy Ghost has ever to continue His work in us through the Word, and daily to dispense forgiveness” (LC II 58).²⁶ The point here is to ever hold before our minds that “justification must be sought elsewhere” than in the fulfilling of the law (Ap IV [III] 176 [55]).²⁷

Nevertheless, while maintaining justification apart from the law, the Confessions state in several places that a Christian ought to grow or increase in his movements and observance of good works. Twice in the early parts of Apology IV (III), *Of Love and the Fulfilling of the Law*, it states that the law be “kept” or “observed” “more and more” (Ap IV [III] 124, 136 [3, 15]).²⁸ Apology XX confesses that upon receiving the Holy Spirit, good fruits follow because Christians “increase in love, in patience, in chastity, and in other fruits of the Spirit.”²⁹ In these passages, both the movements or virtues of love, patience, etc., increase, as should also good works in accordance with the law.

The sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit further causes an increase both in faith and in good works, as FC SD II confesses: the Holy Spirit brings us to the church in the ministry of word, wherein he sanctifies us, causing both the church and individual Christians “daily to grow and become strong in the faith and the fruits of the Spirit” and “daily grow in faith and good works,” such that Christians “even in this life advance so far that they will what is good, and love it, and even do good and grow in it” (FC SD II 37–39).³⁰

²⁶ Dau and Bente, 693.

²⁷ Dau and Bente, 171.

²⁸ Dau and Bente, 157, 159.

²⁹ “Denn wenn wir durch den Glauben den Heiligen Geist empfangen haben, so folgen gute Früchte, da nehmen wir denn zu in der Liebe, in Geduld, in Keuschheit und andern Früchten des Geistes” (Ap XX 15 [92]; Dau and Bente, 342).

³⁰ Dau and Bente, 895.

We ought to increase in good works because they agree with the will of God. FC SD XI gives a further purpose for growing in good works:

[B]elievers, likewise, should not be idle, and much less resist the impulse of God's Spirit, but should exercise themselves in all Christian virtues, in all godliness, modesty, temperance, patience, brotherly love, and give all diligence to make their calling and election sure, in order that they may doubt the less concerning it, the more they experience [perhaps "perceive, recognize, realize"] the power and strength of the Spirit within them.³¹

Here the formulators state that a purpose of trying to do good works, in cooperation with rather than in resistance to the power of the Holy Spirit, is to perceive and realize the power and strength of the Spirit within themselves, and thereby decrease doubt regarding one's election to eternal life.

For some, this may come across as a somewhat incongruous confession, particularly in view of the general, consistent emphasis in the Confessions on the means of grace as communicating assurance and consolation—the work of Christ outside of oneself communicated specifically to a person by the Spirit. It is true even in this very place in the Confessions that the formulators quickly move back to the certainty of the forgiveness of sins: "[W]hen His children depart from obedience and stumble, He has them called again to repentance through the Word, and the Holy Ghost wishes thereby to be efficacious in them for conversion" by the word and sacraments (FC SD XI 75, cf. 76).³²

Nevertheless, as little as we may want to emphasize the encouragement caused by good works revealing the activity of the Spirit, the formulators are explaining the scriptural teaching of 2 Peter 1:10: "[G]ive diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall" (KJV).³³ While good works done in cooperation with the Holy Spirit may not be the assurance or consolation of the forgiveness of sins, they do indicate the work of the Holy Spirit and, thereby, give evidence of election.

Two points should be distinguished. First, again, that good works do not bring about the actual consolation of the heart and conscience that one's sins are forgiven and his person is justified. This consolation, this comfort of the heart, can only come about through the communication of Christ's person and work, the atonement by

³¹ "[D]amit sie desto weniger daran zweifeln, je mehr sie des Geistes Kraft und Stärke in ihnen [in sich] selbst befinden [discover, discern, recognize, detect]/ut tanto minus de ea dubitent, quanto efficacius Spiritus Sancti virtutem et robur in se sentiunt" (FC SD XI 73; Dau and Bente, 1086).

³² Dau and Bente, 1087.

³³ Scripture quotations marked KJV are from the King James or Authorized Version of the Bible.

which the wrath of God is actually removed. Works of the law, whether done merely outwardly by natural powers, or even if done inwardly with the Spirit, are never perfect, and therefore never provide actual satisfaction of the will of God. Second, therefore—and this may be a rather fine, technical point, but it is still worthwhile—good works as fruit and evidence of the Spirit are simply that: evidence that the Spirit is working in our lives, and therefore evidence that God is reconciled to us. They are evidence of one's election to salvation. They are not evidence, strictly speaking, of the forgiveness of sins, nor are they on their own satisfying or consoling. Upholding this distinction between evidence of election and satisfaction for sin may be helpful in understanding this benefit and purpose of good works, and in using it in pastoral care.

As an increase in good works gives evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit in a Christian's life, it also decreases doubt regarding one's eternal election. Because of this, a Christian should not resist the Holy Spirit, but strive to work in accordance with the Spirit's activity and to recognize this activity more and more.

Measuring Good Works

When speaking of growth or increase in good works, some are likely to ask, "If there is growth and increase, how are we to measure this growth?" To enter the discussion of measuring good works is to enter into what is for some a very uncomfortable arena indeed! Nevertheless, let us consider what the Confessions say, for we may find that they reassure us with respect to our discussion of growth and progress.

First of all, it may be helpful to begin with this passage from the Solid Declaration II:

[T]here is a great difference perceptible among Christians not only in this, that one is weak and another strong in the spirit, but each Christian, moreover, experiences in himself that at one time he is joyful in spirit, and at another fearful and alarmed; at one time ardent in love, strong in faith and hope, and at another cold and weak. (FC SD II 68)³⁴

Rather than assuming steady growth and progress, the Formula instead recognizes fluctuations in the Christian life, between joy, fear, alarm, love, hope, coldness, and weakness. While some passages speak generally of growth, this passage speaks of variation, suggesting that while there may be overall growth in faith and fruits of the Spirit, the temptations and weaknesses of any given moment may lead to fluctuations and relatively unfruitful periods. Here the Apology explains helpfully:

³⁴ Dau and Bente, 907.

This faith of which we speak arises in repentance, and ought to be established and grow in the midst of good works, temptations, and dangers, so that we may continually be the more firmly persuaded that God for Christ's sake cares for us, forgives us, hears us. This is not learned without many and great struggles. How often is conscience aroused, how often does it incite even to despair when it brings to view sins, either old or new, or the impurity of our nature! This handwriting is not blotted out without a great struggle, in which experience testifies what a difficult matter faith is. (Latin Ap IV [III] 350–351 [229–230])³⁵

Here the light is rightly focused on repentance: becoming aware of sin and sorrowing over it. Good works, temptations, and dangers confront the Christian with his vices, sins, and inability to overcome sin by his natural powers. Throughout one's Christian life, whether in striving to do better, or in the temptations and afflictions that the Christian experiences, he becomes more and more aware of his sin and weakness. In these moments of confrontation, the Christian may feel and act coldly, he may experience doubt, the burden may inhibit him from acting well. In short, sanctification, the work of the Holy Spirit to keep a person unto salvation, will likely include these times of doubt and dryness. All is not a smooth increase in good works.

In fact, these times of dryness are given so that we would continue in faith and be strengthened in it. The Apology continues, “[W]e are cheered in the midst of the terrors and receive consolation” (Ap IV [III] 351 [230]).³⁶ When our own works, virtues, and strength fails, Christ still works for us, protects us, defeats what opposes us, consoles us, and enlivens us again in thankfulness and joy. Good works, and even faith itself, are difficult and require great struggle. But Christ never fails to be our Lord and champion over those things which are too great for us. Times of dryness and difficulty come upon us to turn us again and solely to the consolation of Christ's person, work, mercy, and presence. Justification must be sought elsewhere than in the fulfilling of the law.

In the same breath, the Apology continues, “And *while* we are cheered in the midst of the terrors and receive consolation, other spiritual movements at the same time grow” [emphasis mine].³⁷ Because the Holy Spirit and faith are the causes of spiritual movements and good works, weakness, vice, and sin become situations in which not only is faith strengthened, but the fruits of faith also. The more a Christian grows in faith, the more he is aware of his sin and weakness, repents of it, and with the increased consolation of faith grows also in the movements and fruits of the Spirit. “From these statements the candid reader can judge that we certainly require good works, since we teach that this faith arises in repentance, and in repentance

³⁵ Dau and Bente, 217.

³⁶ Dau and Bente, 217.

³⁷ Dau and Bente, 217.

ought continually to increase; and in these matters we place Christian and spiritual perfection, if repentance and faith grow together in repentance” (Ap IV [III] 353 [232]).³⁸ Growth, then, really comes in spiritual awareness: increased awareness of the corruption, sin, and weakness of one’s natural powers. Such awareness in the midst of temptation means there will be times—even extended times—of emptiness, dryness, and darkness, perhaps bordering on despair. Yet growth also comes with the consolation of the person and work of Christ through faith, and increasing faith in times of temptation that the Christian—no matter his sin and weaknesses—can look with confidence to his Lord Jesus, and grow in faith and confidence. With such growth, then, the activity of the Spirit is manifest, and a submissive awareness of this activity, along with a renewed, faithful cooperation, means growth also in the fruits of the Spirit.

A word, finally, about what such fruits look like. It is sound and salutary for a Christian to be cautious about simply viewing his good works as though checking off a list of commandments that are fulfilled each day, or tracking how often one commits some kind, merciful, or charitable act toward another person. Indeed, tracking one’s good works is hardly necessary nor expected in the Bible or the Confessions. On the other hand, both the Bible and the Confessions expect that good works will come forth, and that in the usual course of daily life, these good works will be apparent. Yet, as the discussion of weakness, sin, dryness, and temptation indicates, our failure to do good works will also be quite apparent. Awareness of good works and sins, spiritual movements and vices, comes about through regular self-examination. Self-examination is commended in Scripture and the Confessions, and widely encouraged across confessional Lutheranism. “Consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments” (SC V 20)³⁹; “Let each one examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in himself alone” (Gal 6:4, my translation); “Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the LORD!” (Lam 3:40, ESV). We think of self-examination in relation to preparation for confession, to be aware of our sins. Such examination properly takes place according to the law, for it is only by the law that we know truly good works and distinguish them from false, imaginary works of our own invention.

But if such examination is according to the law, then it will also reveal spiritual movements and good works, when they exist. Should the Christian deny, upon self-examination, that he has done good works? Not at all, for such would be to deny the testimony of the Spirit and the word of God. St. Paul even says that upon examining one’s own work, a person will have reason for boasting (Gal 6:4). Granted that

³⁸ Dau and Bente, 217.

³⁹ Quotations from the Small Catechism are from *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation*, copyright © 1986, 1991 Concordia Publishing House. All rights reserved.

the one who boasts, boasts in the Lord (1 Cor 1:31; 2 Cor 10:17), this nevertheless indicates the awareness and confession of the Lord's good work in us by the Holy Spirit. Far from ignoring the good works that we do, the awareness of these works that comes by a true submission to the word of God (not by a facile quantification of works) reveals not what is good from ourselves—for the law surely shows that by our natural powers we are utterly corrupt and do no good works—but what good has been done in us by the Holy Spirit and his regeneration.

In this light, what are we to make of Matthew 25:34–40, where the righteous appear ignorant of the good works they have done? Firstly, one should carefully note that the text does not say that the righteous are ignorant of good works in general, but that they express ignorance that their works were done to Jesus. They do not say to Jesus that they never fed, gave drink, clothed, or visited anyone. They simply say that they do not know when they did it to Jesus. There is no indication here that the righteous are unaware of good works they have done, as such.

Secondly, in this passage, we have Jesus' testimony that the righteous do good works, and that they do them for him. So whatever the cause of the ignorance in the passage, the text itself reveals to the hearer of Scripture that the good works of the righteous are done to Christ. That is, Jesus in this passage is teaching the church—by including the teaching in the Scriptures that the church reads—that the righteous do good works for Jesus. So, again, whatever may be the reason for the ignorance of some of these righteous on the last day, it is not necessary, nor even Jesus' desire, that the righteous in general remain ignorant of the good works they do to Jesus.

In fact, this account in Matthew 25 helps us to grow in our awareness of the true benefits and purpose of good works. Good works are not about measuring the quality of one's character in an isolated fashion, or in comparing with another's righteousness. Good works are for serving others in the church, that is, ultimately serving the body of Christ. Truly good works and spiritual movements are always about humble charity toward the neighbor and congregation. Apology IV [III] 125 [4] clearly confesses that such works consist of fear and love of God, prayer and expectation toward God, thanks and praise to God, and perseverance in affliction. Love toward the neighbor, likewise, has "infinite offices externally towards men" (Ap IV [III] 226 [105]), and is the "bond of perfection . . . the binding and joining together . . . of the many members of the Church" (Ap IV [III] 232 [111]).⁴⁰ All of these works are done in relation to others, for the praise of God and building up of other people, and cannot be understood in some sense of individual virtue or merit.

Indeed, love cannot exist except in relation to others. Consider the various catalogs of spiritual movements in the New Testament. They typically include fruit such

⁴⁰ Dau and Bente, 183, 185.

as godliness, humility, love, patience, meekness, concord, hospitality, thanksgiving, and joy, among others. These are not mere personal habits which an individual exercises in an isolated way to improve his character, tempting him to pride in his accomplishments. Such movements and fruit take a person outside of personal interest into relation with others, both God and men. Godliness is right, humble submission to God's word and thankful, joyful, praiseworthy response to him. Love opens one up to the interests of those around him, calling him further to hospitality and concord. In short, such spiritual movements and fruit can only be exercised among those who have the mutual share of Christ's body and are each members of it in the unity of the Spirit (1 Cor 10:17; 12:12-14; Eph 4:1-4). Truly good works always occur in relation to others, in the humility of the self before God and in loving fellowship with other Christians.

Therefore self-examination according to the word of God leads not to pride and vainglory, but to true humility in relation to the perfection of the word and the activity of the Spirit. Truly good works, true spiritual movements, are the fruit of the Spirit toward the neighbor and toward God. The aphorism that one should not look inward for righteousness, then, ought to be qualified in the sense that one should not look to his natural powers for righteousness, but a Christian certainly does perceive in his heart the movements of love toward God and neighbor that are worked by the Holy Spirit, who dwells within him.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have described what the Confessions sometimes refer to as "spiritual movements," namely, new powers and inclinations to love God and the neighbor, to expect good from God and to thank him, to open oneself to the needs of the neighbor, and to act in accordance with these inclinations. The Confessions describe these as new, real inclinations in the nature of the regenerate man, worked by the Holy Spirit through faith, and residing in the mind, heart, and will. These spiritual movements would be lost were the Spirit to depart from a man, yet they are also true movements by which a Christian cooperates, unequally, with the Spirit to do good works. By further showing the relation of good works to sanctification, we have been able to offer a confessional understanding of growth in holiness which is not quantifiable, but of which the believer is nevertheless aware through spiritual self-examination and awareness of the Holy Spirit at work within him. Aware of this inward work of the Spirit, Christians rejoice in their life together with God and with other Christians, each as members of the body of Christ, sharing in the bond of love, which is the Holy Spirit.