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Luther and Sanctification

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EDITORIAL NOTE. On the eve of Reformation Day the well-known Luther scholar of Wesley House, Cambridge, presented this article as "The Reformation Lecture" of 1958. Inaugurated and sponsored by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of England, this lecture series is an annual feature in the observance of Reformation Day. Some of the previous essayists were: H. H. Kramm, E. G. Rupp, F. J. Taylor, Robert Fischer.

IN a volume of sermons which he published in 1788, John Wesley took occasion to repeat a criticism of Luther that he had first made after reading his commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians many years before. "It has frequently been observed," he says, "that very few were clear in their judgment both with regard to justification and sanctification"; and he cites Luther as an example. "Who," he asks, "has wrote more ably than Martin Luther on justification by faith alone? And who was more ignorant of the doctrine of sanctification, or more confused in his conceptions of it?"¹ In more recent times a similar opinion has been expressed with regard to Luther by a group of Anglo-Catholic theologians in a well-known pamphlet entitled *Catholicity*. After an appreciation of "the great positive truths of Protestantism," among which they include the doctrine of justification by faith (though not faith *alone!*), they proceed to expose what they call "two radical errors" of Luther, one of which they describe as "the dissociation of justification and sanctification."²

The authors of *Catholicity* are not, of course, dependent on Wesley for their estimate of Luther, and their general outlook is in a number of ways very different from his. They disapprove, for instance, of Luther's insistence on justification by faith *alone*, because it seems to them to imply (among other things) a depreciation of the church and the sacraments. Wesley by contrast holds firmly to faith alone, although he fears that Luther "in the fury of his solifidianism" (as he elsewhere calls it) did ill service to the doctrine of good works and practical holiness. But be that

¹ *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, A. M.* (London, 1829), VII, 204.

² *Catholicity: A Study of the Conflict of Christian Traditions in the West* (London, 1947), 20—25.

as it may, the founder of Methodism and the spokesmen of Anglo-Catholicism agree that Luther was seriously defective on the subject of sanctification, and in this they are representative of a conviction that is both old and widespread among non-Lutherans. They are quoted here as illustrating the background against which an English Methodist reads his Luther, and the point of view from which he naturally approaches the subject of this paper.

Now, it is clear that no one who is at all familiar with (let us say) Luther's two catechisms could possibly accuse him of ignorance with regard to sanctification or of indifference to the church and the sacraments. In the Small Catechism he speaks of the Holy Spirit as sanctifying both the individual and the church, and in the Large Catechism sanctification is the whole theme of his exposition of the Third Article of the Creed. Here the sanctifying work of the Spirit is closely associated both with the forgiveness of sins, which is at the very heart of the doctrine of justification, and with the church and the sacraments. Moreover, in his subsequent discussion of Baptism, Luther vigorously attacks people who rely on faith alone to the exclusion of the sacraments. The formula "faith alone" excludes all works of ours, but not the work of God (for which indeed it is intended to make room); and what we have in the sacraments is precisely God's work, not ours. That is why the sacraments belong together with the doctrine of sanctification. They are means which the Holy Spirit employs in carrying out His sanctifying work.

But what does Luther understand by sanctification? What is the content of his idea of holiness? What does it mean for practical purposes? And how is it related to the doctrine of justification by faith alone?

First of all, we should observe that Luther distinguishes sharply between Christian holiness and all other kinds of holiness.³ The difference between them can be expressed by saying that Christian holiness is "alien," not our own, and "passive," not active; that is to say, it is not produced by us but provided for us, not man-made but God-given. Luther understands the original, basic meaning of holiness, as signifying the essential "otherness" of God and of all

³ XL i 69, 11 ff.; 70, 20 f. Cf. XLV 616, 14 ff.; XVII i 309, 14 ff. (Except where otherwise stated, references are to the Weimar edition of Luther's works.)

that belongs to God, in contrast to everything merely human and creaturely. Hence he defines the word "holy" as "separated, and dedicated to God, that none should touch or defile it."⁴ But the specific character and quality of the divine otherness is for Luther determined by Christ, in whom it is most clearly and profoundly revealed. For this reason he is able to say: "True holiness, the holier it is, the nearer it draws to sinners";⁵ for the "otherness" of Christ is very different from what men commonly regard as holiness. It is, indeed, quite other than the holier-than-thou separateness of the Pharisee, which Luther finds exemplified in his own time in both papists and sectaries, among whom holiness is associated with "works" and an outwardly distinctive mode of life.⁶ Such holiness, he contends, counts for nothing in the sight of God.

The fount and source of all true holiness is Christ, who alone is able to make men holy by imparting to them the Holy Spirit.⁷ Christ both prayed and provided for our sanctification when He consecrated Himself as Priest and Victim in sacrifice to God (John 17:17, 19);⁸ and what He did for us then is made available to us now by the Holy Spirit through the Word and Sacraments of the Gospel in the Christian Church. Hence Luther can say: "Although I am a miserable sinner, yet Christ is holy, with His Baptism, Word, Sacrament, and Holy Spirit. That is the only real holiness, given to us by God."⁹ And in his book *On the Councils and the Churches* he places the Word, Baptism, and the Sacrament of the Altar first among seven "marks" of the church, which he describes as *Heiligtümer* by which the church is made holy.

Even the Roman Church can be called holy in virtue of the presence of such holy things within it, and where those things are found among the sectaries, there, too, is the holy church. In the large commentary on Galatians Luther says: "Although the city of Rome is worse than Sodom and Gomorrah, yet there remain

⁴ VII 575, 28 f.

⁵ X iii 327, 10 f., 24 f.

⁶ XXVIII 164, 8 ff.; 173, 1 ff. Cf. XL i 137, 19 ff.; 325, 28 ff.; XXVII 229, 4 ff.

⁷ XX 390, 13 ff.

⁸ XXVIII 174, 22 ff.

⁹ XLV 616, 24 ff.

in it Baptism, the Sacrament, the voice and text of the Gospel . . . the name of Christ and the name of God. Those who have these things have them; those who have not are not excused, for the treasure is there. Therefore the Roman Church is holy. . . . If these things are found among a people, that people is called holy. So our Wittenberg is a holy town, and we are truly holy because . . . we have God's works among us, namely, the Word and Sacraments, and these make us holy. . . . Wherefore the church is holy even where the fanatical spirits reign, provided they do not deny the Word and Sacraments. For if these are denied, there cannot be the church."¹⁰

Here, however, we must underline the statement that "those who have these things, have them; those who have not are not excused, for the treasure is there." The sanctifying effect of the holy things is not automatic. The treasure is there, but it is not necessarily received, and may not even be recognized for the treasure that it is. This is what happened "under the papacy, when faith was wholly shelved and no one recognized Christ as Lord, or the Holy Spirit as one who sanctifies," but instead "they taught that salvation and mercy could be attained through our own works. And hence" — Luther adds — "there was no Christian Church."¹¹ The Roman Church, he says elsewhere, "has invented a peculiar, higher, different, better holiness" than others possess; and while this may be called Roman holiness, it is certainly not catholic or common Christian holiness, and the Roman Church is therefore no true church.¹² Luther is here clearly looking at the church from a different point of view from that quoted in the preceding paragraph. There he was thinking of the church as constituted by the presence of Christ in Word and Sacrament; here he is thinking of it rather as consisting of persons who recognize and receive Christ, being united to him by faith. He is perhaps also forgetting what he elsewhere more than once admits, that even under the papacy there were always at least a few who had true faith.

However that may be, Luther leaves us in no doubt that without faith there can be no effective sanctification of men either individ-

¹⁰ XL i 69, 23 ff.; 71, 19 ff.

¹¹ XXX i 188, 29 ff.

¹² L 626, 12.

ually or corporately. The blessing, the treasure, of holiness that is made available to us in the means of grace is appropriated by faith alone. Hence while he can say that the Word sanctifies, Baptism sanctifies, grace, Christ, God, the Holy Spirit sanctify, he can also say that faith sanctifies.

By faith we are so united to Christ as to become "one being," "one cake," "one body," with Him. The Christian can say: "Who twists my finger, does it to Christ; for I am Christ's littlest little toe. Likewise, if I feed a Christian, then Christ says it is done to Him; for they have become one cake, one being."¹³ It is by virtue of our incorporation into Christ as members of His body, or of our engrafting into Him as branches of the true Vine, that we become partakers of His holiness; and this incorporation or engrafting takes place through the Word and Sacraments of the Gospel, where these are received in faith. "He who believes that Christ sanctified Himself for us," Luther says, "is sanctified."¹⁴ We are not sanctified by the Ten Commandments or works of love, although these also are holy, as is everything else that is contained in God's Word. Still less can we be sanctified by works of our own devising, which God has not commanded. Nothing makes us truly holy but believing in Christ. And everyone who does believe in Christ is holy—not in himself but in Christ, not with a holiness of his own but with Christ's. In this sense, and reviving the New Testament use of the term, Luther maintains that every Christian is a saint, and the church is a community of saints.¹⁵

Sanctification, therefore, is wholly a work of God, but it is a work that has important practical effects in the life of men. "For Christian holiness," Luther says, "is that which comes when the Holy Spirit gives people faith in Christ (Acts 15:9), that is, when He makes heart, soul, body, works and manner of life new, and writes God's commandments not on tables of stone but on hearts of flesh (2 Cor. 3:3)."¹⁶ The Holy Spirit makes of the believer "a new creature, with a different mind, heart, and thoughts," "a new shoot growing out of the Vine of Christ," which bears fruit that is "not

¹³ XXVIII 187, 11 ff., 25 ff.; cf. 184, 11 ff.

¹⁴ XXVIII 175, 7.

¹⁵ XXVIII 178, 2; XXX i 189, 6 f.

¹⁶ L 626, 15 ff.

Adam's or his own but Christ's." ¹⁷ That is something which no "works" can ever do. "Good works," Luther says, "never make the person different. The work-saints may change and improve their works, but they remain in their person as before. . . . But faith changes the person and turns an enemy into a child (of God), while leaving the outward works, stations, and conduct as they were — provided they were not bad works." ¹⁸

The sanctifying work of the Spirit in believers has to do with their relation both to God and to their fellow men. In the first place, it gives knowledge of God, establishing them in true faith against all false ideas and errors, confirming them in hope against all accusations of conscience, and enabling them so to fear and love God that they do not murmur at Him but praise and thank Him for all that happens. "This," says Luther, "is a new, holy life in the soul according to the first table of Moses." Then also "in the second table, and in the body," its effects are such that "Christians . . . willingly obey parents and overlords, conduct themselves peacefully and humbly, are not lewd, adulterers, unchaste, but pure and chaste. . . . They do not steal or take usury, are not avaricious, do not cheat, etc., but work honorably, support themselves honestly, lend gladly, give and help whenever they can. Therefore they do not lie, deceive, backbite, but are kind, truthful, faithful and reliable, and whatever else God's commandments require. . . . That is Christian holiness." ¹⁹

Nevertheless, Christians are not perfect, not sinless. Indeed, from one point of view, Luther can say that the Christian believer is no less a sinner than the unbeliever, the only difference between them being that to the former his sin is not imputed but pardoned, while to the latter it is not pardoned but imputed.²⁰ Here, of course, Luther is not thinking of sinful acts but of original sin, that "concupiscence of the flesh" which is inborn in all the children of Adam, the sin which "is not committed but *is*" and which is the fount and source of all actual sins.²¹ This sin the saints still have

¹⁷ XLV 667, 20 ff., 32 f.

¹⁸ X i 1 228, 6 ff.

¹⁹ L 626, 19—627, 12.

²⁰ XL ii 96, 7 ff.

²¹ X i 1 509, 1 f.

and feel, so long as they are in the flesh. But they resist it by the Spirit, so as not to give way to it, and if they do happen to fall and err (as they often do), they repent and are forgiven;²² for they do not yield to the flesh deliberately and willingly but only through ignorance or infirmity.²³ Otherwise if they do not crucify the flesh with its passions and lusts, they lose faith and the Holy Spirit, and unless they then repent and return to Christ, they die in their sins.²⁴ Men who obey the impulses of the flesh without fear or remorse do not belong to Christ;²⁵ they may dream that they have faith, but if they continue in their sins they have their judgment already.²⁶

The saints, therefore, are at the same time sinners. But they are pardoned sinners, and by the help of the Spirit they fulfill the commandments of God, though not perfectly. Hence we must distinguish, Luther says, between two kinds or aspects of Christian holiness.²⁷ On the one hand there is the holiness of Christ Himself or of the Word of God, of which we lay hold, and in which we participate, by faith; and on the other hand, there is the holiness of works and life, or of love, which is the fulfilling of the Law. The former is perfect, unsullied holiness, and it is in virtue of this that we are saints, members of the *communio sanctorum*, which is the holy church. The latter is a fruit of the former, but it is imperfect and impure because of the infirmity of our flesh and our still-remaining sinfulness. We are thus both pure and impure: pure in Christ and impure in ourselves. Yet through the work of the Spirit we have a real though weak and imperfect measure of purity, which God "drives and exercises through the cross and suffering, to make it stronger and more perfect, so that our faith may increase and our remaining impurity and sin may daily decrease till we come to the grave."²⁸

²² XL ii 104, 10 ff.

²³ XL ii 101, 24 ff.; 107, 15 ff.; XL i 573, 21 ff.

²⁴ XL ii 96, 33 ff.

²⁵ XL ii 102, 16 ff.

²⁶ XL ii 96, 38 ff.

²⁷ XLIII 575, 23 ff.

²⁸ XLV 654, 21 ff.

In the Large Catechism, Luther says that the Holy Spirit "commences sanctification on earth and daily increases it by means of two things: the Christian Church and the forgiveness of sins."²⁹ In the work *On the Councils and the Churches* he expands these two things to seven: the Word, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, the Keys, the ministry, public worship, and "the holy cross." By the last-named he means "all kinds of hardship and persecution, temptation and evil, from devil, world, and flesh," endured for Christ's sake. This, he says, "makes you holy, for it slays the old Adam and makes him learn patience, humility, gentleness, teaching him to praise and thank God and to be joyful in suffering."³⁰ The mortification of the old Adam plays an important part in Luther's doctrine of sanctification — and also of justification, as we shall have occasion to notice — and it should therefore be specially emphasized here. Although the saints are also sinners, in daily need of the forgiveness of sins "till we reach that life where there is no more forgiveness, all persons there being pure and holy,"³¹ yet there is a real increase of holiness and decrease of the power of sin even in this life, for those who truly belong to the communion of saints.

The sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit is carried out, Luther affirms, "not only through the forgiveness of sins, as the anti-nomians foolishly believe, but by the abolition, purging out, and slaying of sins."³² For even here on earth there is "a Christian, holy people in whom Christ lives, works, and reigns *per redemptionem*, through grace and the forgiveness of sins, the Holy Spirit *per vivificationem et sanctificationem*, through the daily purging out of sins and renewal of life, so that we do not remain in sin but can and should lead a new life in good works of all kinds, such as the Ten Commandments require."³³ Moreover, we ought to examine ourselves in the light of the commandments in order to see "how far the Holy Spirit has brought us in His sanctifying

²⁹ XXX i 191, 9 ff.

³⁰ L 642, 1 ff., 28 ff.

³¹ XXX i 191, 5 ff.

³² L 624, 30 ff.

³³ L 625, 23 ff.

work, and how much we still fall short, so that we may not become careless and think that we have now done all that is required. Thus we are constantly to grow in sanctification and ever to become more and more a new creature in Christ. The word is *crescite* and *abundetis magis.*"³⁴

Such in brief outline is Luther's conception of the nature of holiness and the meaning of sanctification. We must now proceed to ask how it is related to his doctrine of justification.

Luther holds that we are justified by faith alone, "without any, even the smallest, works."³⁵ His intention in this, as we have already seen, is to exclude all works of ours and to make room for the work of God. The formula "faith alone" is an expression of his theocentric outlook. It represents his religious concern that God should be truly recognized as God, that is, as alone Creator and Redeemer. But it also represents his ethical concern that not only our works but our persons, as doers of the works, should be righteous and good. We cannot be justified by works, he maintains, because "good works do not make a good man." "Justification," he says, "belongs to the person and not to the works. For the person and not the works is justified, saved, judged, or condemned. So it is clear that no work justifies the person, but the person must first without any works become righteous by something else."³⁶ This "something else" is of course faith—faith in God through Christ—which, as Luther again and again asserts, "changes the person" and "makes a quite new man." And because faith really does make a new man, Luther can say that "justification is a kind of regeneration to newness of life."³⁷

The change that is involved in this "regeneration" can be described in a variety of ways. It can be said that when a man comes to have faith in God through Christ, or when he believes the Word of God, then he acknowledges for the first time the true state of affairs between himself and God. That is to say, he confesses himself to be a creature and a sinner, and God to be his Creator

³⁴ L 643, 19 ff.

³⁵ VII 231, 7.

³⁶ X i 325, 14 ff.

³⁷ XXXIX i 48, 14.

and Redeemer. In this way, "by the Word of truth, the heart is made true."³⁸ Or it can be said that when we lay hold of Christ by faith, then "in the faith itself Christ is present,"³⁹ and for His sake God forgives us all our sins and gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, Christ and the Spirit come to dwell in our hearts; and that in no merely figurative sense but really, substantially, and effectually. Moreover, of both Christ and the Spirit Luther affirms that they are "not idle" but living and active, carrying out their work of redemption and sanctification.⁴⁰ Nor will their activity permit *us*, as believers, to be idle, and faith itself can be described as "a living, busy, mighty, active thing."⁴¹

Although, therefore, faith alone justifies, justifying faith is never alone: it is never unaccompanied by works and by love.⁴² Luther sharply distinguishes the true Christian from both "faithless work-saints," who seek to be justified by their own good works, and "workless believers," who imagine that they have justifying faith although they do no good works.⁴³ Genuine faith is that which "worketh by love" (Gal. 5:6). At the same time, Luther vigorously repudiates the Scholastic doctrine of "faith furnished with love" (*fides caritate formata*), which makes love, as the fulfilling of the Law, the essential ground of our justification.⁴⁴ He is ready to say that the Gospel gives what the Law demands and that faith enables us to fulfill the Law; but this is not what justifies us. Faith alone justifies, because faith alone is the means by which we can lay hold of Christ, in whom alone is the ground of our justification. Christ is our Righteousness, given to us by God. Nevertheless, when by faith we receive this gift, it produces results. Love and good works are the fruit of justifying faith and are evidence that we are truly justified. "Good works," Luther says, "certify us and bear witness before God, men, and even ourselves,

³⁸ VI 94, 9 f.

³⁹ XI i 229, 15.

⁴⁰ See P. S. Watson, *Let God Be God* (London, 1947), pp. 167 f.; in translation: *Um Gottes Gottheit* (Berlin, 1952), pp. 191 f.

⁴¹ Bibel, 7, 11, 8 (Preface to Romans).

⁴² VII 231, 9; XI i 427, 11 ff.

⁴³ XLV 689, 2ff.

⁴⁴ XI ii 34, 10 ff.; cf. XI i 225, 15 ff.

that we truly believe, are truly children of God and heirs of eternal life in hope.”⁴⁵

It is true that there may often be little outward difference between the works of a Christian and those of a decent heathen or “a civil honest man.”⁴⁶ For the works that God appoints for the Christian are simply those given in the daily round and common task of life. From this point of view Luther can say that good works are a quite inadequate index of a person’s faith and his standing with God. Yet there is a great difference in the spirit in which true Christians do their works: namely, the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of willing love.⁴⁷ Love is therefore the supreme rest of faith for Luther,⁴⁸ and faith and love together are for him a complete summary of the Christian life. The Christian, he says, is like a vessel or tube, open above by faith to receive all things freely from God, and open below in love to pass on all things freely to his neighbors.⁴⁹ By faith we are children of God, but by love we are gods; we do to others as God in Christ has done to us and are indeed Christ to our neighbors.⁵⁰ The love we show finds expression in mutual forgiveness and forbearance, the bearing of one another’s burdens, willingly serving one another in our vocations, fulfilling the commandments of God in the ordinary round of daily life.⁵¹

Sometimes Luther’s descriptions of the new man in Christ rise to quite lyrical heights and seem to suggest that the justified believer is altogether perfect and sinless. At other times, as we have seen, he asserts that the believer is no less a sinner than the unbeliever. But in a more balanced statement of his view he holds that the believer has received the forgiveness of sins and the first fruits of

⁴⁵ XXXIX i 292, 25 ff.

⁴⁶ L 643, 26 ff.; XL i 573, 26.

⁴⁷ L 643, 29 ff.; XL i 574, 14 ff.; cf. A. Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (trans. P. S. Watson, revised ed., London, 1953), 727—730. Note also that believers are said to have a new and a good will—XL i 540, 31 f.: *novi et pii affectus . . . nova voluntas*; XL ii 95, 13: *voluntas bona . . . Spiritus ipse rebellans carni*.

⁴⁸ XXXVI 474, 10 f: *Si charitas non, nec fides, sed mera hypocrisis*.

⁴⁹ X i 1 100, 9 ff.; c. XLV 591, 29 ff.

⁵⁰ XLV 540, 7 ff.; XXXVI 437, 29 ff.; VII 66, 3 ff., 34 ff.

⁵¹ In contrast to sectaries and papists; cf. XL ii 64 ff., and esp. 66, 18 ff., 67, 19 ff.

the Spirit (*primitiae Spiritus*) but that he still has in him remnants of sin in the flesh (*reliquiae peccati in carne*).⁵² Hence it can be said that the Christian is both righteous and a sinner, *simul iustus et peccator*.

In order to understand Luther's position here, it is necessary to bear in mind an important qualification of his doctrine of faith. While he distinguishes sharply between believer and unbeliever, he never takes the view that a man must have either complete and perfect faith or else no faith at all. He maintains that there are degrees of faith, and also that faith fluctuates: it is not a fixed quantity or a stable, abiding possession. The firmness and strength of faith may vary, not only from person to person but also from time to time in the same person. If we had perfect faith, Luther says, we should not long remain in this life, but be quickly translated to heaven.⁵³ As it is, our faith is imperfect, and consequently also the fruits of faith, our love and good works, are imperfect. If we had perfect faith, we should have perfect love.⁵⁴ The love that we have, no doubt, insofar as it is the love of God shed abroad in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, is perfect; but *we* are not perfect. We are not yet all love and moved by nothing else but love. The imperfection of our faith means "an imperfect newness of life in the Spirit and a remaining oldness of the flesh and Adam."⁵⁵ Hence even the works wrought by God through the indwelling of Christ and the Spirit in us are imperfect — just as the work of the most skilled craftsman cannot be perfect if it is done with an imperfect tool.

Nonetheless, if we have any real faith at all, we are justified; that is to say, although we are not yet righteous, we are "in motion or on the way to righteousness." For justification means 1. that we are accounted righteous (*reputari nos iustos*) for Christ's sake; 2. that no sin, whether past or remaining in the flesh, is counted against us (*imputari*); 3. that there is the beginning of a new creature (*initium novae creaturae*); 4. that there is a battle against "the sin of the flesh" (*pugna contra carnis peccatum*), which sin

⁵² XL i 364, 2 f., 18 ff., 25 ff.; 408, 12 f.; cf. 312, 29 ff., 431, 23 ff.

⁵³ XL i 598, 23 f., 599, 18 f.; cf. XL ii 81, 15.

⁵⁴ XXXIX i 297, 22 ff.

⁵⁵ I 559, 27 ff.

"is both pardoned and conquered through the same faith in Christ."⁵⁶ Sin, therefore—original sin—remains but does not reign in the true believer.

In the light of this it is not difficult to understand two apparently contradictory assertions of Luther. On the one hand he says that the Christian is partly righteous and partly a sinner and, on the other, that he is wholly righteous and wholly a sinner. The Christian is wholly righteous in Christ, in the sense that Christ's righteousness is imputed to him, or he is accounted righteous for Christ's sake, and his own sinfulness is not imputed to him but freely and unreservedly forgiven. Yet he is wholly sinful in himself, inasmuch as the original sin remaining in him, even though it does not reign, affects every part of his being and infects everything that he does. At the same time it can rightly be said that he is partly righteous and partly a sinner, because he is in fact regenerate by the Holy Spirit, though not yet completely so. There is a real measure of new life in him, as well as the sin that has still to be eradicated.

We have as believers, Luther says, "partly the flesh and partly the Spirit, but in such a way that the Spirit rules and the flesh is subdued, righteousness reigns and sin serves."⁵⁷ Indeed, it can even be said that "a Christian, insofar as he is such, does not sin."⁵⁸ He has the impulses of original sin in him no doubt still, but he resists them by the Spirit so as not to fall into actual sin. Consequently, while the presence of good works may not be infallible proof of genuine faith, the presence of evil works is unmistakable evidence of unbelief or false faith.⁵⁹ For although we can never be sinless in this life, we can very well live without wickedness;⁶⁰ and while we are not saved by good works, we shall surely be damned if we do not cease from evil works and repent.⁶¹ A moral life, Luther holds, should be as much taken for granted as sleeping

⁵⁶ XXXIX i 83, 16 f., 35 ff.

⁵⁷ XL ii 93, 19 ff.

⁵⁸ XXXIX i 528, 6.

⁵⁹ X iii 267, 13 ff., esp. 17 ff.

⁶⁰ VI 27, 6 ff.

⁶¹ XVII i 313, 11 ff.; XLVI 467, 23 ff.

and waking.⁶² But even if our life and conduct are blameless, we are not therefore without sin, nor can we be, so long as we live in this present evil world.

Inasmuch as we are sinners, however, Luther always insists that as Christians we are not finished products but only in the making, so to speak. The Christian life, he says, is not a matter of being but becoming; it is not righteousness but justification, not purity but purification, not health but healing. We have only begun to be pure, begun to be regenerate, and even (Luther can say) begun to be justified.⁶³ Hence "so long as we live in the flesh, we begin and make progress toward the fulfillment in eternal life."⁶⁴ For the process of becoming gives place to being only in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come, where alone there is perfect righteousness, holiness, and love.

The starting point of the process may be said to lie in Baptism, which signifies, as Luther explains in *The Babylonian Captivity*, "death and resurrection, that is, full and complete justification." "This death and resurrection," he adds, "we call the new creation, regeneration, the spiritual birth." What Baptism means, of course, is realized and made effectual only through faith, so that "as soon as ever we begin to believe, we also begin to die to this world and to live to God in the life to come." But Baptism is not merely an initiatory rite: it has reference to the whole life of the baptized. It calls for daily dying and rising again through daily repentance and faith, daily mortification of Adam and the flesh, and daily vivification of the new man in Christ through the Spirit. And we die, Luther says, "not only spiritually and in our affections, by renouncing the sins and vanities of this world, but we die in very truth, we begin to leave this worldly life and to lay hold of the life to come."

Our leaving of this worldly life can be described in terms of the journeying of ancient Israel out of Egypt to the Promised Land.⁶⁵ It is a journey out of the kingdom of sin and Satan to the kingdom of God and eternal life. Sometimes Luther seems to represent it

⁶² XVII i 313, 3 ff., 18 ff.

⁶³ XXXIX i 146, 12 f.; 289, 29 f.; XL ii 24, 19.

⁶⁴ VII 59, 30 f.

⁶⁵ II 535, 30 ff.; XVI 264, 22 ff.

as if it were simply a movement through time to eternity: as if it meant no more than that each day that passes brings us a day's march nearer home. But there is more in it than this. For it is, he says, "a transition and a progress from vices to virtue, from glory to glory, from virtue to virtue"; and he adds that a man in whom no such transition takes place is not to be regarded as a Christian.⁶⁶ Again and again he speaks of a daily growth in grace and in what we may call the graces of the Christian character. Faith makes us better, he says, though not all at once, for it is a lifelong process;⁶⁷ and there is a lifelong process of the purging out of sin.⁶⁸ The Holy Spirit works to increase in us daily the true knowledge of God, and with it also other gifts, such as chastity, obedience, patience, so as to break the power of sin.⁶⁹ The Christian life means daily increase and growth in faith and the Spirit.⁷⁰ Moreover, as we have already noticed, Luther urges us to examine ourselves in the light of God's commandments, to see how the Spirit's work in us progresses; and we may add that he elsewhere gives us a series of tests that we can apply to see whether the work of God is being done in us.⁷¹

This daily progress, however, on which Luther insists, can only take place on the basis of a daily Baptism of repentance and faith. From this point of view, Luther can say that "to progress is to begin ever anew."⁷² By this he does not mean that there is no progress in the sense of real betterment, but that no such progress can take us beyond the need for ever-renewed repentance and faith as the condition of the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit, which alone make any progress possible. Furthermore, even where real progress is made, "those who make progress," he says, "are always beginners in relation to what they have not yet attained";⁷³ and "the more progress a man has made, the less

⁶⁶ II 536, 3 ff.

⁶⁷ XI 90, 30 ff.

⁶⁸ XV 727, 15—30; cf. XXIX i 551, 6: *de die in diem sanctor et melior.*

⁶⁹ XL ii 351 f.; cf. XV 727, 15 ff.; XL i 351, 29 f., 352, 12—28.

⁷⁰ LI 181, 25 f.

⁷¹ X i 1 129—138; cf. XL i 574, 25—575, 12; X iii 421, 14.

⁷² IV 350, 15 f.

⁷³ IV 344, 12 ff.

does he count himself to have progressed.”⁷⁴ It is the greatest saints that are the most acutely aware of their sinfulness; and with reference to the conflict between the flesh and the spirit, which every Christian experiences, Luther says, “The more godly a man is, the more does he feel that battle.”⁷⁵

Luther, of course, will never allow us to imagine that our standing with God in any way depends on the progress we make. If we do so, we shall either become complacent and self-satisfied because we think we are getting on very well, or else we shall succumb to despair because we seem not to be getting on at all. But in either case we shall be putting our faith and hope in ourselves instead of in God and in Christ, and that will put an end to all possibility of progress. Hence he continually insists, on the one hand, that we have not yet attained the goal of righteousness — we are sinners, in fact, righteous only in hope — and on the other hand, he assures us that our hope is well founded because it rests on the promise of God.

With reference to a parable which he loves to use, Luther compares the Christian to the half-dead man who was succoured by the Good Samaritan.⁷⁶ Christ, he says, as our Samaritan, has brought us into His inn, the church, where He has promised us that we shall get perfectly well, and He has begun to heal us. And just as a sick man believes his doctor’s assurance that he will recover, even if he sees no sign of recovery himself, so we as Christians believe Christ’s promise that we shall be completely cured of sin; and just as the sick man obeys his doctor’s orders, so we seek to do as Christ bids us in order not to hinder our cure or worsen our disease. But the work of healing is all Christ’s own, and whether we ourselves see and feel any improvement or not, we can and must trust His promise that He will carry it through. Our sin, by the mercy of God, is not a sickness unto death, but our cure will not be complete until we have put off our mortal flesh and put on immortality. When death is swallowed up in victory, we shall have attained “complete righteousness and perfect love.”⁷⁷

⁷⁴ IX 107, 30.

⁷⁵ XL ii 94, 14 f.

⁷⁶ XL i 408, 16 ff.; LVI 272, 3 ff.

⁷⁷ VI 27, 13 ff.

From what has now been said, it should not be difficult to see how justification and sanctification are related to each other in Luther's thought. It is clear that his understanding of justification includes much more than the merely forensic notion of acquittal or pronouncing righteous. It might almost be described as a process of making righteous, for by the faith through which we are justified we receive not only the grace of the forgiveness of sins but also the gift of the Holy Spirit. And if we daily need the grace because we are only imperfectly righteous, we also receive daily with it the regenerating, purifying gift. But much the same could be said with regard to Luther's doctrine of sanctification; for that, too, includes not only the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier, but also the forgiveness of sins, which is an essential part of His sanctifying work. Hence we may say that justification and sanctification are different aspects, or even simply different descriptions, of one and the same work of God; the emphasis in the case of justification lying rather on the element of the forgiveness of sins, and in the case of sanctification on the renewal of life.

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