

The Holy Spirit Sanctifies and Preserves the Church

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Introduction

According to the cultures of Zambia, the country where I live, the people like to do much ritual cleansing. People are cleansed. Places are cleansed. Things are cleansed. Such cleansing is done by special ceremonies. When a stranger or foreigner dies in a village, a ceremony is arranged to cleanse the whole village. When a person dies, the village is cleansed. The bereaved family prepares a feast. They brew beer. They invite the chief and the village elders. They cleanse the whole village from the spirits of the departed, so that these spirits will not trouble them again.

There are also times when in a village children or elders continue to die, one after the other, and diviners are called to find the cause of such deaths. The diviner makes people drink some medicine, and whoever vomits is looked upon as the one who is causing those deaths. He can be killed or chased from the village. Thereafter, the whole village is cleansed. It is cleansed to chase away the evil spirit of that evil person who was causing those deaths.

Also when a chief or president of our country is installed as chief or president, special powder is smeared on the forehead of that person to show that the person has been consecrated for a holy purpose. This is not done to any other person. In this way this person is cleansed, or consecrated for the special work he is to carry out in his office.

It is commonly believed that once a person, place, or thing is cleansed, or consecrated, such things become holy, and nothing evil can stand in their way.

In Old Testament times "persons, places and things" were cleansed also, i.e., consecrated to serve holy purposes (cf Ge 2:3; Ex 13:2; 40:10-13, etc.). Connected with this were the Mosaic rites of purification (cf. e.g. Nu 6:11; Lev 22:16, 32; Heb 9:13). Garments were washed in preparation to meet God (Ex 19:10,14). Priests were consecrated for their service to God, including their vestments (Ex 29:1-9), warriors were consecrated (Isa 13:3). The firstborn was dedicated (Dt 15:19). The plunder from battle was dedicated for use in the temple (2 Sa 8:11). These rites, however, when applied to persons were efficacious only in a ceremonial sense and did not extend to the purifying of the moral and spiritual nature. They were symbolical, and thus were intended not only to remind the people of the necessity of spiritual cleansing, but also of the gracious purpose of God to actually accomplish his work in a spiritual way. So David prayed, "Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean," and also "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (Ps 51:7,10).

Thus we have seen how important it is for people to feel cleansed. In our African village life our people want to be cleansed from evil spirits. In the Old Testament God himself provided for ceremonial ways in which his people should be cleansed and consecrated for his special service (Ex 19:10-23; Lv 11:44-46; 20:7). In the New Testament God also wants his people to be cleansed for his special service. Since he is a holy God, he wants his people to be "made holy" or "sanctified," in order to serve him. This cleansing is not merely an outward cleansing, but an inward cleansing of heart and spirit. It is the work of God especially assigned to the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit (2 Th 2:13; 1 Co 6:11; Tit 3:5). It is that work generally known as the work of sanctification. The Greek word for "sanctify" is *hagiazō*, literally to "make holy."

For us to understand how the Holy Spirit sanctifies and preserves the Church on earth, it is important for us to see how the Bible and the Confessions of our Church use this word "sanctification." Like so many other words in Scripture, it is used in more than one way. It is used in a narrow sense and in a wide sense.

In its narrow sense, sanctification designates the internal spiritual transformation of the believer, or the holiness of life which follows upon justification. As we read in Romans 6:22, "But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life." The Formula of Concord states: "In the same manner the order also between faith and good works must abide and be maintained, and likewise between justification and renewal, or sanctification. For good works do not precede faith, neither does sanctification precede justification. But first faith is kindled in us in conversion by the Holy Spirit from the hearing of the gospel. This lays hold of God's grace in Christ, by which the person is justified. Then, when the person is justified, he is also renewed and sanctified by the Holy Spirit, from which renewal and sanctification the fruits of good works must then follow" (Trigl. 929, Sol. Decl., III, 40f.).

The Holy Scriptures and our Lutheran Confession, in other words, use the word "sanctification" to point us specifically to a renewal of life in which man's nature is delivered from the service of sin and dedicated to the service of God. Paul speaks of this new nature as living "by the spirit," leading a life of sanctification in bringing forth the fruits of the spirit, which are listed as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal 5:22,23). It is the sanctified life of the Christian which follows justification.

The word "sanctification" is also used in a wider sense in Scripture to include the entire work of the Holy Spirit as the "Giver of Faith." It includes the work of the Holy Spirit in his use of the Means of Grace, the Word and the Sacraments, to carry out his work. We have heard this presented in the preceding papers at this conference. It is in this wider sense that Martin Luther used the word "sanctification" in his Small and Large Catechisms when he entitled the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed relating to the work of the Holy Spirit as "Of Sanctification." In his explanation of this Article he states, "I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Ghost has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian Church he daily and fully forgives all sins to me and all believers. On the last day he will raise me and all the dead; and he will give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true" (The Third Article, Sanctification, explanation; Luther's Small Catechism in WELS Kuske edition, p. 188).

In his large Catechism Luther explains how the Holy Spirit's work of sanctification also includes bringing us to Christ through the preaching of the gospel (Trigl. 689). This is sanctification in its entire sense as the work of the Holy Spirit. It comprises all that the Holy Spirit does in rescuing man from sin, creating faith within him, helping him to persevere in that faith and keeping him in that faith until his final deliverance in heaven. It includes justification, as we read in 1 Corinthians 6:11, "But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."

Let us follow this sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in its wider sense as we follow these steps of Luther in his explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed, applying these steps especially in our field experience in Central Africa.

Christians Are Called by the Gospel

In 2 Thessalonians 2:13,14 Paul says, "From the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul here says that God chose us to be saved and not to perish. Our salvation embraces the fullness of God's purpose to deliver us from the ravages and consequences of sin. The way in which he will accomplish this will be through the sanctifying work of the Spirit. He continues to say how we were called. He says, "He called you through our gospel." Here Paul shows that the gospel is the means by which God's call comes to us. It is through the preaching of the gospel that God calls us to himself. He calls us out

of the unbelieving world to be holy. The Holy Spirit calls us through the gospel in word and sacraments.

This has been the wonderful story of the growth of the church of Jesus Christ, as recorded for us in the book of Acts. We see in the early Church in Jerusalem how believers were added to the Church through the word which the apostles taught (Ac 2:38-47). The Ethiopian eunuch (Ac 8:35-39) is another person who heard the gospel and was baptized. When Peter preached in the house of Cornelius, the Holy Ghost came to all those who heard the word and were baptized (Acts 10:44-48). At Pentecost Peter stood up and said to the people, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Ac 2:38). God the Holy Spirit calls through the word. We would not have believed if the Holy Spirit did not work through the word. "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Ro 10:17). The gospel is active not only in the spoken word, but also in the sacraments. In Titus 3:5 Paul says, "He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit." As we receive the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper, we also receive the body and blood of Christ, given and shed for the forgiveness of our sins (1 Co 10:16).

The book of Acts shows us especially how wonderfully this power of the Holy Spirit was active in extending the Church of Jesus Christ to all the world. In the very first chapter of Acts Jesus says to his disciples that they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Ac 1:8). The call of the gospel of Christ went out to many different places, especially through the work of the Apostle Paul. Paul, however, did not do this by his own power. Very frequently Luke, the writer of Acts and Paul's co-worker, refers to the work of the Holy Spirit in accomplishing this growth. In his commentary on the book of Acts, F. F. Bruce writes that the entire book might be fittingly called "The Acts of the Holy Spirit" (The Acts of the Apostles p. 30).

We in Central Africa have truly seen this in action. It was nearly forty years ago that my father came to Lusaka from Malawi and became a member of the Lutheran Church in Lusaka in a location called Matero through one of the earliest missionaries who shared the gospel of our Lord Jesus with him. The first service was in his house, and he became a lay preacher until the Bible Institute was established in 1964. He was one of the first three graduates of the Lutheran Seminary in 1972. From the few congregations that were established, some of which were started by him in various parts of Lusaka at that time, the Lutheran Church of Central Africa (LCCA) has grown to a membership of over 35,000 people in over 200 congregations scattered throughout Zambia and Malawi, reaching also into Mozambique, and with some contacts in Tanzania, Congo DR, and Zimbabwe.

We are not praising ourselves for this wonderful growth. For a Christian to be able to do something that is pleasing before God, it is the work of the Holy Spirit alone. "For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Php 2:13). God must make the unwilling willing. He must give the strength and power to conquer sin. The Christian will then live a life of repentance. He will be able to help his neighbors; he will be forgiving; he will support the work of the Church. These are not the fruits of the flesh, nor are they the consequences of his own personal activity. It is God that works these things in him.

In Zambia the gospel is spreading like fire. The Holy Spirit is working through the gospel we continue to preach in its truth and purity. Many people are called to faith. Members who move to other areas where we do not have a church try to invite us, but since the laborers are few, we sometimes fail to reach them. The membership in our conference continues to grow because the gospel is working. Most of the people who come to town have no church at all. There are also many small churches mushrooming every day. These as we know have no sound doctrine. They are very aggressive and seem to have a large following, but end up confusing people. As Lutherans our goal is to continue to teach and preach the same truth as presented in the

Scriptures because we believe that the Holy Spirit is in control to convict people of their sins and bring them to our Lord Jesus Christ.

The churches which seem to be spreading very quickly around us today are the Pentecostal Churches. They emphasize human feelings and emotions as the work of the Spirit rather than facts as presented in the Scriptures. They emphasize special revelations, speaking in tongues, miraculous healing based upon personal experience, things which have no real basis in Scripture. Because many people in Africa like to express their feelings outwardly, they are often trapped by the false teachings of other churches. Spirit-worship has always been a part of African traditional religion, in which the spirits of the gods, the spirits of the ancestors, the spirits of the tribes control the people's lives. Many syncretistic churches cause great confusion to our people.

How important it is, therefore, for us to teach that the Spirit of God comes to us alone through his holy Word and the sacraments, Baptism and Lord's Supper. It is through these means alone that we are called by the gospel.

Having been called by the gospel, having been brought to faith in Jesus Christ as our only Savior from sin, devil, and death, we are, as Luther adds, enlightened with spiritual gifts.

Christians Are Enlightened with Gifts

But what are some of the gifts with which the Holy Spirit has enlightened us? For us to understand how Christians are enlightened with gifts, it is important that we understand what it means to be enlightened. The word "enlightened" means that the Holy Ghost brought us out of the darkness of unbelief into the light of faith so that we can see all the gifts God gives us in Christ. Jesus says in John 8:12, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." Again Jesus says, "I am sending you to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive the forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me" (Ac 26:17,18). Paul also says, "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ" (2 Co 4:4).

Once a person believes in the Lord Jesus Christ as His Savior from sin, and walks with him in faith, he sees these gifts which the Holy Spirit has given him. What are some of those gifts which the Holy Spirit has given him? In Ephesians 1:7, Paul says, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace." The Holy Spirit has enabled us to see that through the blood of Jesus we have the forgiveness of our sins. It is impossible to know this without the help of the Holy Spirit. Again Paul in Romans 5:1 says, "Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." We are no longer troubled by our sins because we know that the blood of Jesus Christ has cleansed us from all unrighteousness. We are no longer rebellious to God as before. We do what God tells us to do. God speaks to us when we need his comfort, encouragement, wisdom. This all is a result of the peace we have with God. Again in Titus 2:11-13, Paul says, "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ."

Since the Holy Spirit has enlightened us to see by faith such wonderful gifts of God as forgiveness, peace, hope, joy, and comfort, we will be able to produce the fruits of faith. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Co 5:17). In Ephesians 2:10 Paul again says, "We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." Having been created anew by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, a Christian will be able to produce good works. Jesus tells us, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5). Indeed we can do absolutely nothing without Jesus, but through believing in him the Holy Spirit enables us to produce good works.

People in our country like to say that it is difficult to discover a gift or a talent. I think this is true to some extent. For one to know that his talent is that of a potter or a designer can be difficult. He might try other jobs first which he thinks are important or can give him a high income. He learns the hard way that money does not grow on trees. He then decides to do whatever comes along. A friend invites him to join in making pots, cups, plates, etc. He says to himself, "Well, since I have not found what I am looking for, I can meanwhile be passing time doing it." He does it for few months and he sees that the commodities are selling like hot cakes. He works hard in that business and as years go by, he realizes that it is his talent.

That is the same way the Holy Spirit also works. He calls us and gives us faith. Then he shows us the gifts which are there for us. Before he called us we did not see these things. But after calling us, we now see them. We realize that this is why we were called and rejoice that we have found the most needed gifts (talents) in our lives.

Christians Are Sanctified and Kept in the Faith

The Holy Spirit's work of sanctification is a continuous process. Luther emphasized this in his explanation to the Third Article when he stated that the Holy Spirit has not only "called me by the gospel" and "enlightened me with his gifts," but he has also "sanctified and kept me in the true faith."

By bringing me to faith in Christ as my Savior a "new self" has been born (Eph 4:24; Col 3:10). In this life here on earth, however, the Christian retains his sinful nature. The "old self," born in sin, still is there to trouble him (Eph 4:22). The Apostle Paul writes about this struggle still going on between his sinful nature and the Spirit of God dwelling within him (Ro 8:9). In Galatians he writes, "The sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want" (Gal 5:17).

The dangers to our faith that are caused by our sinful nature may vary. People speak about many different desires that are contrary to the Spirit: sexual immorality; selfish ambition; dissensions, etc. He also includes "witchcraft," which is the problem that is especially dangerous in our African culture (cf. Gal 5:16-21). Instead of being led by the Spirit of Christ, there is the danger of being controlled by the "spirit world" in which the life of people in Africa was centered as a result of their natural religion and beliefs.

This is true because when most Christians are confronted by problems, e.g. sickness or death in the family, witchcraft becomes the source of all evil. Many people would not believe that the person has died a normal death due to sickness and non-availability of proper medication. They would still think somebody caused it. When a sickness is prolonged, then it is not a normal sickness, somebody has witched that person. It is because of being controlled by the spirit of the world that people's minds think this way. This is one of our biggest challenges as pastors in Africa, to help those who are afraid of other forces to trust in the Lord for guidance and protection.

The work of the Holy Spirit must therefore continue to work in us as Christians. He has certainly given us the Means of Grace to do this. Our Baptism should be a daily reminder to us of that new life in Christ into which we have been reborn. Paul states in Romans 6:4: "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." We should continue frequently and faithfully to receive Christ's body and blood in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Again, as Paul encourages us in 1 Corinthians 11:26 "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." He also states in Colossians 3:16, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom."

The danger often exists that we turn to Christianity as some kind of supernatural medicine which can magically cure our trouble, without realizing that the new Spirit of Christ within us needs to be constantly strengthened with word and sacraments as long as we live. "Dear friends," John writes in his first epistle (1 Jn 4:1ff), "do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world." John, we know, especially warns against "the spirit of the antichrist."

May we therefore, as the Apostle Paul admonishes, “Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes” (Eph 6:10,11). Make use of the means of grace, God’s word and sacraments, through which the Holy Spirit keeps us in the true faith.

Christians Are United in One Holy Christian Church

All believers everywhere in this world are united in one holy Christian church through the work of the Holy Spirit. By faith in Jesus their sins are washed away “by the washing with water through the word” (Eph 5:26). They are members of Christ’s body (Eph 5:30). They are no longer foreigners and aliens but fellow citizens, “built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Eph 2:19,20). They are all “baptized by one Spirit into one body” (1 Co 12:13).

They are gathered into one spiritual body, and only God knows the members of his church (2 Ti 2:19). Yet we can be sure that his holy Christian Church is found where the gospel is preached and the sacraments are used as instituted by Christ (Mt 28:19,20). Jesus says, “Where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them” (Mt 18:20).

So also we are sure that the Lord Jesus is with us at this conference through his Holy Spirit. It is a great encouragement for me to be here personally. We come from different parts of the world. We have different cultural backgrounds. We speak different languages. Yet we have one spirit. Jesus said to the people who believed him, “If you hold to my teaching, you really are my disciples” (Jn 8:31). May the word of Christ dwell in us richly as we teach and admonish one another with all wisdom (Col 3:16).

I shall close with words from the book of Hebrews 10:24,25, “Let us consider how we may spur one another toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” On the last Day, as Luther closes his explanation to the Third article of our Creed, the Holy Spirit “will give to me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true.”

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