

Essay #1:  
**God Sanctifies Us—  
He Makes Us Holy After He Declares Us Holy**

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The Lutheran Reformation brought back to light the glorious truth that sinful human beings are saved by God's grace alone through faith alone apart from any human work or merit. In the course of his spiritual struggles, Luther was led to an understanding of the proper distinction between the law and the gospel and the proper relationship between justification and sanctification. Roman Catholic theology confused law and gospel and combined justification and sanctification in a way that robbed people of comfort and led them into work righteousness. Misunderstanding of the proper relation between justification and sanctification has been common throughout the history of the visible church and continues to plague much of Christianity today.

These two doctrines are precious biblical truths but they must be kept in the proper relationship to each other. On the basis of Scripture we will see:

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**The Need for Justification and Sanctification—  
Adam's Fall and Human Sin**

When Adam and Eve fell into sin, they ruined the perfection of God's creation. They had been created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27; 5:1). They were endowed with righteousness and true holiness. Their will conformed to his will. But when they fell into sin they lost that image. They became corrupt and passed on their corruption to all of their descendants. "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12).<sup>1</sup>

Children inherit a sinful nature from their parents. Jesus tells us, "Flesh gives birth to flesh" (John 3:6). Sinful parents cannot produce sinless children. In fact, from the very point of conception a

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<sup>1</sup>All Scripture quotations are from the NIV1984.

child is corrupt. Every human being must confess with King David, “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (Psalm 51:5). Because of original sin, we stand condemned even before we have the ability to think or do anything. The Bible declares, “The result of one trespass was condemnation for all men” (Romans 5:18). Because we have inherited Adam’s sinfulness, we have inherited Adam’s guilt.

Original sin involves a total and complete corruption of our human nature. We could not know or understand the depths of this corruption if God had not revealed it to us in his Word. The Bible tells us, “You were dead in your transgressions and sins” (Ephesians 2:1). “The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so” (Roman 8:7). God declares, “every inclination of his [i.e., the human] heart is evil from childhood” (Genesis 8:21). St. Paul uses a series of Old Testament references to demonstrate the total corruption of our natural condition. He writes,

“There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.” “Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit.” “The poison of vipers is on their lips.” “Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.” “Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know.” “There is no fear of God before their eyes” (Romans 3:10-18).

We confess those truths in the second article of the Augsburg Confession:

Furthermore, it is taught among us that since the fall of Adam, all human beings who are born in the natural way are conceived and born in sin. This means that from birth they are full of evil lust and inclination and cannot by nature possess true fear of God and true faith in God. Moreover this same innate disease and original sin is truly sin and condemns to God’s eternal wrath all who are not in turn born anew through baptism and the Holy Spirit (Augsburg Confession, Article II:1,2, German text).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>All quotations from the Lutheran Confessions are from Kolb/Wengert, Fortress, 2000.

Because we are by nature totally corrupt, we cannot save ourselves. Even our best efforts fall far short of God's demands. "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6). Coming close to God's standards is not enough. Jesus says, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). "Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it" (James 2:10).

We therefore reject every teaching that denies or minimizes original sin. For example, the Roman Catholic Church teaches that original sin is not a total corruption but only a weakening of human spiritual powers. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, "As a result of original sin, human nature is weakened in its powers; subject to ignorance, suffering, and the domination of death; and inclined to sin. (This inclination is called 'concupiscence.')" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994, #418).

### **The Basis for Justification—God's Grace and Christ's Merits**

Already in eternity, before the fall into sin or the creation of the world, God saw our predicament and planned our salvation (Ephesians 1:4). His love, mercy, and grace moved him to provide a Savior for us.

Love, mercy, and grace are qualities or characteristics of God. These words describe an essential attitude or disposition of God toward his creation. The love of God is a selfless, undeserved love, which loves sinful human beings in spite of their transgressions, guilt, and hostility toward him. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son" (John 3:16). In his mercy God has not treated us as our sins deserved but has provided salvation for us. "He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy" (Titus 3:5). God's grace is entirely independent of our actions. We cannot buy, earn, or deserve it. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8,9). Grace and human works are mutually exclusive terms. "And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace" (Romans 11:6).

In eternity God saw our dilemma. In time he sent his Son to be our Substitute and Savior. "But when the time had fully come, God

sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons” (Galatians 4:4,5). God demanded perfection. Our Substitute needed to be perfect in our place. Therefore Jesus was made subject to the law to redeem us. In our Savior “we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). God credits his perfect obedience to us.

Because “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23), our Substitute had to die. God demanded Jesus’ lifeblood as the price of our salvation. St. Peter writes, “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect” (1 Peter 1:18,19). Jesus’ sacrifice was good once for all. When on the cross he declared, “It is finished” (John 19:30), his redemptive work was complete. No other sacrifice is necessary. “Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself” (Hebrew 7:26,27). St. John assures us, “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). Jesus is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

Universal atonement means that Christ has redeemed the whole world, all sinners of all time. We therefore reject the Calvinistic doctrine of limited atonement, namely that Jesus did not die for everyone, but only for those whom the Father purposed to save.

### **Justification—God’s Declaration of Full and Free Forgiveness**

Justification is a declaration. It is a courtroom term. To justify is the opposite of to condemn. That is how Scripture uses the term. “Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us” (Romans 8:33,34). God pronounces guilty sinners not guilty. Justification involves a change in status

before God's judgment seat. It takes place outside of us. The fact that God has justified us does not mean that we are no longer sinners. It means that he no longer treats us as sinners. He declares, "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more" (Isaiah 43:25). God remembers our sins no more because he remembered them in Jesus. God does not count our sins against us because he counted them against his Son, our Savior. He has forgiven our sins. The apostle declares, "We have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins" (Ephesians 1:7). If God has forgiven our sins, he has justified us. Justification and the forgiveness of sins are simply two ways of saying the same thing. Indeed, "to obtain the forgiveness of sins is to be justified" (Apology, Article IV:76). We confess:

The word "justify" here means to pronounce righteous and free from sins and to count as freed from the eternal punishment of sin because of Christ's righteousness, which is "reckoned to faith by God" (Phil. 3[:9]). This is consistent with the use and meaning of this word in Holy Scripture, in the Old and New Testaments. Proverbs 17[:15]: "One who justifies the wicked and one who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the Lord." Isaiah 5[:23]: "Woe to those who acquit the guilty for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of their rights!" Romans 8[:33]: "Who will bring any charges against God's elect? It is God who justifies," that is, who absolves from sin and pronounces free (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article III:17).

### **Universal Justification**

Whom has God justified or forgiven? He has justified the entire world. Listen to the testimony of Scripture. "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them" (2 Corinthians 5:19). God has reconciled the whole world by not counting people's sins against them. If God does not count the world's sins against the world, he has forgiven or justified the world. "Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life [literally, the justification of life] for all men" (Romans 5:18). Note the parallel between Adam's sin which brought condemnation for all mankind and the work of Jesus which brings justification for all mankind. "For all have

sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:23,24). Just as every human being has sinned, so also every human being has been justified. “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). If the sin of the world has been taken away, the world is forgiven. Just as Jesus, the Substitute for all sinners of all time “was delivered over to death for our sins,” he was also “raised to life for our justification” (Romans 4:25). Jesus’ resurrection was God’s stamp of approval on his work of atoning for the sins of the world.

Since the sins of the whole world have been paid for; God has declared the whole world not guilty, forgiven, pardoned. Luther described God’s universal forgiveness in this way:

Even he who does not believe that he is free and his sins forgiven shall also learn, in due time, how assuredly his sins were forgiven, even though he did not believe it. . . . He who does not accept what the keys give receives, of course, nothing. But this is not the key’s fault. Many do not believe the gospel, but this does not mean that the gospel is not true or effective. A king gives you a castle. If you do not accept it, then it is not the king’s fault, nor is he guilty of a lie. But you have deceived yourself and the fault is yours. The king certainly gave it (*Luther’s Works*, Vol. 40, pp. 366,367).

In the Apology, Philip Melancthon approvingly quotes Ambrose of Milan who says that God forgave the sins of the world in Christ at the cross:

“The law was shown to be harmful since all are made sinners, but when the Lord Jesus came, he forgave the sin for everyone, which no one could avoid, and he blotted out the bill of indictment that stood against us by the pouring out of his blood [Col. 2:14]. This is what Paul says [Rom. 5:20], ‘the sin abounded through the law; but grace superabounded through Jesus.’ For after the entire world was placed in subjection, he took away the sin of the entire world, just as John testified, saying [John 1:29], ‘Behold the Lamb of God, behold, the one who takes away the sin of the world.’ And so let no one glory in works, because no one is justified by their deeds” (Apology, Article IV:103).

The gospel is the clear declaration that in Christ God has forgiven the sins of all people of all time. He has justified the world.

### **Subjective or Personal Justification**

Although God has forgiven the sins of the world, not everyone will be saved. Salvation comes through faith. Unbelief rejects God's forgiveness. As our Savior told Nicodemus, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son" (John 3:16-18).

We are saved *by* or *through* faith not *because of* faith. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8,9). Faith is not something that God rewards. People are saved by God's grace, his undeserved kindness. Faith is not such a good work that it merits or earns salvation. The Holy Spirit rules that thought out when he says that salvation is a gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast. If faith merited salvation we could boast because then we would have done something which God had to reward. But the Bible says we cannot boast because even faith itself is a gift of God. Faith merely receives what God has promised.

We are saved by faith *alone*. The Scriptures declare, "We maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law" (Romans 3:28). If salvation and the faith which receives salvation are gifts, then we cannot earn them. In the same way, if faith were a good work which merited salvation, then it wouldn't be a gift. In that case God would owe the believer salvation. St. Paul explains, "Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness. David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: 'Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the

Lord will never count against him'” (Romans 4:4-8). God has justified the wicked. That means that he has justified you and me. Believe it. As the Augsburg Confession states,

Furthermore, it is taught that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness in his sight, as St. Paul says in Romans 3[:21-26] and 4[:5] (Augsburg Confession, Article IV, German text).

We therefore reject every teaching that asserts that sinful human beings can either save themselves or at least contribute to their salvation in some way. For instance Rome claims,

If anyone says that justifying faith is nothing else than confidence in divine mercy, which remits sins for Christ's sake, or that it is this confidence alone that justifies us, let him be anathema [i.e., cursed, excommunicated] (*The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, Sixth Session, Canons concerning Justification, Canon 12).

Since the initiative belongs to God in the order of grace, *no one can merit the initial grace* of forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, *we can then merit* for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and for the attainment of eternal life (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2010).

### **Conversion—the Bestowal of Faith by the Holy Spirit**

The Bible is very clear about God's role in conversion. Jesus says, “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (John 15:16). Our Savior tells us, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44). The Scriptures generally assign the work of conversion to the Holy Spirit. St. Paul writes, “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot



understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14). Without the Holy Spirit we are unable to believe God’s message of salvation because it seems foolish to us. But when the Holy Spirit works faith in our hearts he makes spiritual people out of unspiritual. God declares, “No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3). The Holy Spirit leads us to the conviction that Jesus is our Lord and Savior. He makes believers out of unbelievers. He works faith in our hearts.

The Holy Spirit works faith through the means of grace, the gospel in God’s Word and the sacraments. Just as no one can come to faith apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, so also no one will come to faith apart from the Word of God. St. Paul makes that very clear in his letter to the Romans. He writes, “‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’ . . . Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:13-15,17). We cannot separate the Word of God from the work of the Holy Spirit or the Holy Spirit from the Word of God. Our Savior says, “The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life” (John 6:63).

God’s Word is the means through which the Holy Spirit converts us. St. Peter explains, “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Peter 1:23). The Augsburg Confession testifies to that truth:

So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and the sacraments as through instruments the Holy Spirit is given, who effects faith where and when it pleases God in those who hear the gospel, that is to say, in those who hear that God, not on account of our own merits but on account of Christ, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace on account of

Christ. Galatians 3[:14b]: “So that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Augsburg Confession, Article V:1-3, Latin text).

The Holy Spirit also works through Baptism to awaken or strengthen faith. As the Scriptures declare, “But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the *washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit*, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:4-7). Through Baptism we are born again and renewed by the Holy Spirit. St. Peter told his hearers on Pentecost, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Ananias told Paul in Damascus, “Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name” (Acts 22:16).

Since we receive God’s forgiveness through Baptism we also receive salvation and a clean conscience toward God. If God has forgiven our sins, then we are saved from his wrath and all of our guilt has been removed. The Bible declares, “Baptism . . . now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God” (1 Peter 3:21).

Baptism can accomplish all of this because it is not just plain water or an empty ceremony. Luther puts it this way:

Baptism is not just plain water, but it is water used by God’s command and connected with God’s Word (Small Catechism, Baptism, I).

It is certainly not the water that does such things, but God’s Word which is in and with the water, and faith which trusts this Word used with the water. For without God’s Word the water is just plain water and not Baptism. But with this Word it is Baptism, that is, a gracious water of life and a washing of rebirth by the Holy Spirit (Small Catechism, Baptism, III).

In the Lord’s Supper we receive Christ’s true body and blood with the bread and the wine. Through the Lord’s Supper the Holy Spirit

strengthens faith. “‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Corinthians 11:25,26). Holy Communion offers and conveys the forgiveness of sins. Indeed, the new covenant is the forgiveness of sins. As we confess,

What blessing do we receive through this eating and drinking? That is shown us by these words: “Given” and “poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins.” Through these words we receive forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation in this sacrament. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation (Small Catechism, Holy Communion, II).

We therefore reject semi-pelagianism, which claims that sinful human beings can make a start toward God on their own which God rewards with grace to assist them in their conversion. We reject decision theology and every form of synergism, which claims that in order to be converted a sinner must ask Jesus to come into his heart or that to be converted an unbeliever must open his heart to the Holy Spirit. We also reject the teaching that the Holy Spirit creates and sustains faith apart from the means of grace.

### **Sanctification in the Wide Sense**

The work of the Holy Spirit is called *sanctification*. To sanctify means to make holy, to set apart for God. Sanctification in the broad sense of the term refers to the entire work of the Holy Spirit to lead us to salvation, from conversion to preserving us in faith to the end. As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, “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” (2 Thessalonians 2:13,14). He wrote to the Corinthians, “To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 1:2). Again, “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

Martin Luther summarizes the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in his explanation to the third article of the Apostles Creed. "I believe that . . . the Holy Spirit 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" (Small Catechism, Creed, Third Article).

### **Sanctification in the Narrow Sense**

The term *sanctification* is also used in a narrow sense. Sanctification in the narrow sense is the process through which the Holy Spirit leads Christians to abhor sin and to live a life filled with good works. Sanctification flows from justification. It is the response of a grateful heart to God for all that he has done for us. What is a good work? It is something that corresponds to God's will and flows from faith. In fact, "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Hebrews 11:6) and "everything that does not come from faith is sin" (Romans 14:23).

Through faith we have been delivered from the *power* of sin to control our lives. St. Paul writes, "For we know that our old self was crucified with him [Jesus] so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin" (Romans 6:6). We have been delivered from the power of sin so that we might live for the one who loved us and died for us. A person who has been converted is a new person. He has spiritual life where once there was only spiritual death. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). To be in Christ means to believe in him.

When the Holy Spirit created faith in our hearts he renewed in us the image of God which Adam and Eve lost when they fell into sin. The renewed image of God is often called our new man or new self. Our new self has a different attitude from our old self, that is our old Adam or sinful nature. Our new self is created to be like God in righteousness and true holiness. According to our new man we want what God wants. Christians "have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator" (Colossians 3:10). Paul reminds us that we are different from what we were by nature when he writes, "You

were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:22-24).

The new life within us produces works that are good in God’s eyes. God created us anew for that very purpose. “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10). There is no such thing as faith that doesn’t do good works. St. James explains, “Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. . . . As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead” (James 2:17,26). If a person has been converted or brought to repentance, he will automatically do good works because that is what faith does.

The power or ability to produce good works comes from God himself. Jesus says “No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. 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” (John 15:4,5). To remain in Jesus means to remain connected to him by faith. Good works flow from faith.

An unbeliever cannot cooperate with the Holy Spirit in conversion. By nature he is spiritually dead. He has no power to cooperate. However, when a person is converted, when new life is created in him, he can and does cooperate with the Holy Spirit in his life of sanctification by the power of the Holy Spirit that gives him that ability. He has been “created in Christ Jesus to do good works” (Ephesians 2:10). As the Formula of Concord explains,

As soon as the Holy Spirit has begun his work of rebirth and renewal in us through the Word and the holy sacraments, it is certain that on the basis of his power we can and should be cooperating with him, though still in great weakness. This occurs not on the basis of our fleshly, natural powers but on the basis of the new powers and gifts which the Holy Spirit initiated in us in conversion, as St. Paul specifically and earnestly admonished, that “as we

work together with” the Holy Spirit “we urge you not to accept the grace of God in vain” [2 Cor. 6:1]. This should be understood in no other way than that the converted do good to the extent that God rules, leads, and guides them with his Holy Spirit. If God would withdraw his gracious hand from such people, they could not for one moment remain obedient to God. If this passage were to be understood as if the converted person cooperates alongside the Holy Spirit, in the way two horses draw a wagon together, this interpretation could not be tolerated without damaging the divine truth (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article II: 65,66).

In justification faith is purely passive. In sanctification faith is very active. In his “Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans” Luther describes faith in a Christian’s life of sanctification.

Faith, however, is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God, [John 1:12,13]. It kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different men, in heart and spirit and mind and powers; and it brings with it the Holy Spirit. O it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them. Whoever does not do such works, however, is an unbeliever. He gropes and looks around for faith and good works, but knows neither what faith is nor what good works are. Yet he talks and talks, with many words, about faith and good works.

Faith is a living, daring confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times. The knowledge of and confidence in God’s grace makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and with all creatures. And this is the work which the Holy Spirit performs in faith. Because of it, without compulsion, a person is ready and glad to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything, out of love and praise to God who has shown him this grace. Thus it is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible

as to separate heat and light from fire (*Luther's Works*, Vol. 35, pp. 370,371).

Good works, however, don't save us. Good works are the visible evidence that we are saved. Good works don't make someone a believer, but a believer will do good works. Good works flow from faith; they do not precede faith. Good works demonstrate that the Holy Spirit has done his work in our hearts. St. James declares, "Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do" (James 2:18). The Augsburg Confession states,

Likewise, they [i.e., our churches] teach that this faith is bound to yield good fruits and that it ought to do good works commanded by God on account of God's will and not so that we may trust in these works to merit justification before God. For forgiveness of sins and justification are taken hold of by faith, as the saying of Christ also testifies [Luke 17:10]: "When you have done all [things] . . . say, 'We are worthless slaves.'" The authors of the ancient church teach the same. For Ambrose says: "It is established by God that whoever believes in Christ shall be saved without work, by faith alone, receiving the forgiveness of sins as a gift" (Augsburg Confession, Article VI, Latin text).

We reject every teaching that makes justification before God dependent on sanctification rather than recognizing that sanctification is a result of justification. Likewise, we reject every teaching that confuses justification and sanctification. Such teachings rob people of comfort and the certainty of salvation because sanctification will always be imperfect in this life. For example, Rome teaches, "Justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1989). Lutheran Pietism brought a similar error into the Lutheran church. Philip Jacob Spener (1635-1705), the father of Lutheran Pietism, fell into the error of making justification dependent on sanctification when he wrote, "As the faith, which alone justifies us and makes holy, is inseparable from good works, so no one will be justified other than those who are intent upon sanctification" (quoted in Dale Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978, p. 97).

## **Sanctification Remains Imperfect in this Life, But Christians Will Strive to Grow**

Conversion is instantaneous. A person is either a believer or an unbeliever. Justification is full and complete. A person either possesses the forgiveness of sins and salvation by faith or he doesn't. There is no such thing as being half forgiven. But our life of sanctification is different. It is a gradual process. Sanctification has its ups and downs. Although Jesus has given us the victory over sin, we will not be totally free of sin until we are in heaven. We will retain our sinful nature until the day we die. Therefore sanctification will remain imperfect in this life. That is why Paul writes, "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me" (Philippians 3:12).

In fact, there is a struggle in every Christian between his sinful nature and the new man the Holy Spirit has created in him. "For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want" (Galatians 5:17). St. Paul, the great apostle and model Christian, describes the inner struggle that he experienced:

I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:18-25).

Because we know that our sinful nature is totally corrupt and will cling to us until we die, we reject every type of Christian perfectionism that claims or implies that a Christian can reach a point in this life that he no longer sins. Every Christian is *simul iustus et*



*peccator*, at the same time saint and sinner. We are righteous in God's eyes because he has pronounced us not guilty for Christ's sake. Nevertheless, we remain sinful human beings who sin every day and fall short of God's standards of perfection. That is why Jesus in the Lord's Prayer teaches us to pray, "Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us" (Luke 11:4). As Luther explains,

We pray in this petition that our Father in heaven would not look upon our sins or because of them deny our prayers; for we are worthy of none of the things for which we ask, neither have we deserved them, but we ask that he would give them all to us by grace; for we daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment. So we too will forgive from the heart and gladly do good to those who sin against us (Small Catechism, Lord's Prayer, Fifth Petition).

Some Christians will be stronger spiritually than others. Individual Christians will also have ups and downs in their life of sanctification. That should not surprise us. As the Formula of Concord reminds us,

Because in this life we receive only the first fruits of the Spirit and our rebirth is not complete but rather only begun in us, the struggle and battle of the flesh against the Spirit continues even in the elect and truly reborn. For one can detect not only a great difference among Christians—one is weak, another strong in the Spirit—but within each Christian, who is at one moment resolute in the Spirit and at another fearful and afraid, at one moment ardent in love, strong in faith and hope, and at another cold and weak (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article II: 68).

Yet even though Christians cannot reach perfection in their sanctification in this life, they will strive to live according to God's will. Our Savior condemns indifference toward good works. To the church at Laodicea he says, "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth" (Revelation 3:15,16).

Those who understand the gospel will want to do those things which please God. "For Christ's love compels us, because we are

convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again” (2 Corinthians 5:14,15). The Bible encourages us, “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). And again, “Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more” (1 Thessalonians 4:1).

The Bible also points the way for growth in sanctified living. As Paul wrote to Timothy, “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:14-17). Later essays will address this important truth.

## **Conclusion**

In point of time justification and sanctification cannot be separated. When the Holy Spirit brings us to faith, at that moment we are fully and completely justified. God declares us holy. At that very moment the Holy Spirit also begins the process of sanctification, making us holy.

We can and must, however, distinguish justification and sanctification logically as we speak of cause and effect. Justification produces sanctification. We strive to do good works because we want to please the God who has forgiven all of our sins. Sanctification cannot produce justification before God because our sanctification in this life will always be imperfect and God demands perfection. We are justified because our perfect Substitute Jesus lived and died in our place. Justification is not dependent on our sanctification. However, sanctification is dependent on justification. Our God makes us holy after he declares us holy.

May God help us always to teach these two important doctrines clearly and without confusion. To him alone be glory!

### **For Discussion**

Explain: A correct understanding of original sin is essential for a correct understanding of justification and sanctification.

Explain: Justification by faith alone guarantees that salvation is by grace alone.

Explain the relationship between faith, good works, and salvation.

Agree or disagree: Pastors should primarily preach sanctification to Christians rather than justification because they are already fully justified.

Explain: The only way to encourage fruits of faith is to encourage growth in faith.



John Brenner—Essay #1