

Lutheran Ethics in View Of Justification, Sanctification and the Two “Kingdoms”

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The question is asked, “What is the relationship between the doctrines of justification and sanctification, and Lutheran ethics?” To answer the question three issues must be addressed and properly synthesized. Firstly both justification and sanctification must be defined, comparing and contrasting them with each other. The second is that the shape of the sanctified Christian life must be explored and outlined. The last issue is to explain their relationship with ethics.

“Justification” is usually defined as the explanation or reason for a particular action or occurrence. For example, my “justification” for being late for class might be that there was a car crash ahead of me on the road, making the trip unusually long. In the case of the Christian, “justification” is the reason why we are able to stand as sinful humans before a perfectly righteous God. To expand on this point, humans are justified in standing before God because the incarnate Son of the Father, Jesus of Nazareth, made it possible to do so through his life and atoning death. This “justification” is not in any way merited by humanity, but is freely offered to all humans by God. Humans appropriate for themselves the benefits of this offer; that is, being able to stand before God despite our sinfulness, by trust alone. This trust is itself created in us by God the Holy Spirit when the message of this “justification”, the good news or Gospel of Jesus, is preached or taught. In this way we say that justification is offered by God’s mercy or “grace” alone, and appropriated by trust, or “faith”, alone. So “justification” is Christian shorthand for the relationship established between *all* humans and God by Jesus, in one sense, and between individual humans and God by trust in Jesus, in a more particular sense.

“Sanctification” is literally, the “making holy” of the one brought to trust in Jesus as the one “justifies” his stand as a sinner before a holy God. “Sanctification” is the “manifesting (of) the work of God in men, galvanizing them into action and filling their hearts with love of their neighbor”¹. This too is the work of God alone through the Word of the Gospel, either through preaching and teaching, through the once for all time application of Holy Baptism, or participation in Holy Communion². The Word of God creates the faith in Jesus that justifies, and that same faith creates the “new” person who conforms to the image of God. Thus one may say that “justification defines the believer’s posture with God and sanctification describes his posture in the world.”³

Justification is always perfect. There can be no “degrees” of justification. We are never in a position of being “partially free of condemnation” before God. Justification is usually spoken of in Lutheran circles as a “judicial” act of God. Our sin remains, yet for Christ’s sake by faith in his work God declares us “not guilty” of being unholy. Sanctification is more complicated, perhaps because it deals with our posture “in the world” and so is less amenable to abstract theorizing. Sanctification is not an atemporal “judicial” posture on the side of God, but rather God’s temporal work in and through us, day by

day, in our earthly life. Having neatly dealt with our very real sinful nature and acts on the side of justification, what does one do with the “sins” committed by a person who has been “made holy” by the work of God’s Spirit? Only when this question is answered can the form of a Christian ethics be established.

One answer is to say that God’s declaration of “not guilty” extends to the life of the Christian, and that the “freedom” of the Christian is freedom to do what one pleases in this life: “let us sin that grace may abound.” The ethics of the sanctified Christian, then, would be very subjective indeed. Clearly this sort of explanation does not match the Scriptural understanding of the life of the Christian. Paul himself explicitly rejects this view of the sanctified life of the Christian in the 6th chapter of Romans.⁴

A second answer would be that God’s declaration of “not guilty” is due to the sanctified life of the Christian. The Christian leads a holy life before God, and in view of this God declares him to be “not guilty”. Paul rejects this view, not coincidentally, in the 7th chapter of Romans, following his rejection of the libertine understanding of the sanctified life in chapter 6.⁵ This view is also explicitly rejected in the Formula of Concord: “(we reject) that faith saves because by faith there is begun in us the renewal which consists in love toward God and our fellow man.”⁶

A third answer, and the one suggested as the most Scriptural in this paper, is that the sanctified life of the Christian is of a two-fold character. The sanctification of a Christian is not judicial in character, but a very real change. But neither is it the basis of our standing before God. The sanctified life of the Christian consists first of all in the thankful response to God of the “new creature” he has become by the work of the Holy Spirit. He desires to love as Jesus loved, to care as Jesus cared, and to serve as Jesus served. All of this is not the Christian’s own doing, but rather the work of the living Jesus, the Christ of God, continued in the Christian by the Holy Spirit. Secondly, it consists in the daily putting to death of the old nature that still inheres in the Christian, causing the Christian to continue rebelling against God⁷. The Christian mortifies his old nature, rejecting those things that do not conform to Christ. The new creation must daily put to death those things that would tear him away from Christ. This is the shape of the sanctified life; the love of Christ in us motivates us to do good, and the threat of eternal punishment compels the old nature in us to “cease and desist” from its rebellious ways. The sanctified life is a constant struggle between these two opposing wills.

What does this all this mean for Lutheran ethics? Phrased positively, it means that we choose to act as Christ acted, and Christ serves as the pattern for our behavior. We do not necessarily focus on certain actions as inherently right or wrong, as a deontologist would. Neither are we so focused on outcomes that the rightness or wrongness of individual actions becomes irrelevant. Rather, we are molded into the pattern of Christ, so that our life becomes conformed to his. We serve in the world as Christ did. Negatively, we choose to avoid certain courses of actions because of the threat attached to them⁸. The old nature within will listen to nothing but threats of punishment. We do not kill because if we did, we might be arrested and thrown in jail. Our life as ethical beings is dually motivated, first by love created daily within us by the Spirit

through the Word of God, and secondly by the threats of that Word against bad behavior.

A Lutheran who desires to be ethical, in other words a Christian, who remains in faith by the work of the Holy Spirit, is one who continues to hear the Word of God. That Word, preached and taught rightly, gives the Law needed to restrain the old nature, and provides the Gospel that empowers the new creation that is the Christian to be conformed to Jesus. The Christian never acts ethically purely out of a motive of thankfulness; there is always an element of threat that subdues the old nature. The Christian never acts purely out of a desire avoid God's punishment; the new creation is always recognizing that its ethical behavior is due solely to God's work in him. Such an understanding of ethics safeguards the fact that God alone creates the new will able to serve him, and that the Christian alone is responsible for his unethical conduct by way of his old nature. The new will is empowered by the work of the Holy Spirit while the old nature is subdued by the threats of the law.

This leaves the remaining issue unaddressed: what is an appropriate Lutheran ethic, or pattern of behavior, in the world? This is no simple problem. One author writes: "The Gospel forgives and motivates (the Christian), but from what and to do what?"⁹. Lutherans have traditionally understood the underlying motivations of Christian behavior, as demonstrated above. Lutherans have also written much about the spheres in which we are to *be* ethical. Luther speaks of three realms in which the Christian lives: the home, the church, and the state¹⁰. The home consists of the relationships of children to parents, husbands to wives, and even servants to masters. Luther derives the basis of these relationships from the 4th commandment: "Honor your father and your mother." The sphere of the state, the relationship of government to its citizens, also flows out of the 4th commandment. This sphere or realm of behavior is often divided now into two separate realms: the realm of "work" and of "society"¹¹. The last realm is that of church, best described by Augsburg Confession VII as "the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel."¹²

But how are we to *be* ethical in those spheres? What is to be done by the Christian in them? Or, as the case may be, not done? First of all, we must ask if the actions of a Lutheran in each of these spheres will always be the same. Lutherans traditionally reject the idea that a Christian is called to act the same way toward fellow Christians as he or she acts in the realm of work or society, generally speaking. Killing another Christian in the church is simply impermissible, in all cases. However if a Christian carries out executions for the state, such killing is considered acceptable. Within the Church—the so-called "kingdom of the right"—Christians deal with each other according to the Gospel. In their vocations and in society—the "kingdom of the left"—Christians relate to other people according to the rule of law.

The ethical responsibilities of a Christian in each of these spheres are outlined in the "Table of Duties" of the Small Catechism¹³. One author writes, "The Small Catechism connects sanctification—the life of the living sacrifice—with vocation"¹⁴. In the table of

duties Luther strings together a series of biblical precepts to assist the Christian in dealing ethically with their spouse, children, parents, masters, and government. All of these flow out of the Golden Rule: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (as Paul repeats in Romans 13:9). This is a good start, but does not begin to deal with the more complicated ethical dilemmas one might face as a Christian living in a sinful world.

Consider, for example, the Christian who serves in government. As a Christian in the church he lives under the call of the Sermon on the Mount, to "turn the other cheek" (Matt 5:39). Yet as a servant of the government he is called to deal with those in the world who are *not* Christians. Indeed, if non-Christians were not restrained by the law, "the world would be reduced to chaos"¹⁵. So as a servant of the government he is called *not* to "turn the other cheek", but rather to execute justice. As a Christian, he is called to pray for his enemies, but as a servant of the government, he is called to defeat them.

The key, then, to Lutheran ethics is being sure of the sphere you are acting. In the realm of the church, the Holy Spirit rules and forgiveness reigns supreme. Cheeks are turned, offenses forgotten, and repentance is at the core of all relationships. People are good toward one another according to the work of the Spirit within them, producing his fruits. In the realm of society, the law established in everyone's heart (Romans 1:19-20, Romans 2:14-15) rules. The transgressor is punished and good works are done out of fear of punishment, or at least out of fear of being shamed in the eyes of the world¹⁶.

One question remains. What is to be the Lutheran ethic on the fuzzy edges between church and world, between the kingdoms of left and right? St. Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians 5 of the immoral man who must be put out of the church. He is to be handed over "to Satan for the destruction of the flesh." (1 Cor 5:5). Clearly the church is called on to turn certain people out of the kingdom of the right and into the kingdom of the left, *for their own good*. Does this destroy the prevalence of the Gospel in the kingdom of the right? Can a Christian choose to not forgive out of a vengeful desire to see the transgressor "tossed out of the church"?

The dividing line between the kingdoms must be repentance. What distinguishes a Christian from a non-Christian is a life of repentance, seeking forgiveness from our neighbors and from God. Only when this desire to repent is lost has someone removed *himself* from the church and placed himself in the realm of the state. Consider the teachings of Jesus. In the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee, Jesus shows that the Publican is justified (forgiven and in the church) by his repentant prayer (Luke 18:10-14). In the parable of the Father and the Two Sons, the one son "repents" of not having heeded the call to work in the field, changes his mind and goes. He is the one who does his Father's will (Matt 21:28-32). When Jesus discusses "church discipline", he makes bringing the sinner to *repentance* the first priority (Matt 18:15-17).

This hardly begins to describe the complicated relationship between justification, sanctification, and Lutheran ethics. But it does outline the contours of that relationship. The Christian is justified and brought to faith by God's grace alone. His sanctification is

worked by the Holy Spirit in two ways; by daily drowning the Christian's old nature through the application of the law, and by producing the fruits of the Spirit through the Gospel. The Christian, then, is motivated to do good works by the movement of the Spirit through the Gospel and is restrained from doing evil by the Law. The Christian must also consider in what sphere he finds himself to determine his ethical response. Is he in the sphere of the government, where law rules? Or the sphere of the church, where the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount reign supreme and Christians are called to a life of repentance? Only by properly understanding his motives for ethical behavior, and discerning the realm in which he finds himself, can the Christian begin to evaluate what the most ethical courses of actions would be.

1. Köberle, Adolf The Quest for Holiness (Ballast Press, Evansville, IN: 1936) p.89
2. Köberle, *ibid.* p.95
3. Scaer, David "Holiness: Man's Unending Quest" in The Quest for Holiness (Ballast Press, Evansville, IN: 1936) p.ix
4. Romans 6:1-7
5. Romans 7:14-23
6. Formula of Concord: Epitome, III, 5 in The Book of Concord Theodore Tappert (ed.) (Fortress, Philadelphia, PA)
7. Köberle, *ibid.* p.168-169
8. This "daily drowning of the old nature" by the Law is what is classically known within Lutheranism as the Law's "3rd use". The Law's 1st use is its restraining of the evil present in all humans, Christian and non-Christian. Its 2nd use is to show our continued rebellion of human against the will of God. The "third use" is its use as a guide for the Christian life. The Christian, in so far as he is a new creation, has no need of the law. Since the new creation is solely the work of the Holy Spirit sent by Jesus Christ and the Father, it has no need of the Law: it *is* the Law. If the new creation were not in full conformity with the Law, the "new" creation would remain an imperfect reality and could certainly not claim to be a "saint" or holy one (as Paul calls all Christians in his epistles). But the old nature remains. This nature does not desire to serve God, but enjoys its continued rebellion. The Law must be continually spoken to this old nature. The law, however, is not applied externally by the natural order, by conscience, or by government, but by *the new creation itself*. So the law is actually applied by the Christian internally to the old nature. This is the "3rd Use of the Law". Stumme writes that "For the mainstream Lutheran ethical tradition, however, there is no third use of the law that stipulates a specifically Christian form of existence replete with distinctive patterns of obedience." Yet he cannot help but add that "the God of the Decalogue is quite enough." Those who would reject a 3rd

use of the Law end up resurrecting it in some other form. (Stumme, John "A Tradition of Christian Ethics" in The Promise of Lutheran Ethics Karen L. Bloomquist and John R. Stumme, Eds. (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN: 1998) p.16)

9. Stumme, *ibid*, p.28
10. Luther, Martin "Temporal Authority" Luther's Works Vol 45 (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN) p.88
11. Stumme, *ibid*, p.13 and Koberle, *ibid*, p.50
12. Augsburg Confession, Article VII, 1 in The Book of Concord
13. Small Catechism VIII in The Book of Concord
14. Pless, John "Catechesis for Life in the Royal Priesthood" in A Reader in Pastoral Theology (CTS Press, Fort Wayne, IN: 2002), p.66
15. Luther, M. "Temporal Authority" Vol. 45: Luther's works (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, PA) p.91
16. This idea appears in the Formula of Concord, Article VI on the Third Use of the Law. "We believe, teach, and confess that works done according to the law are, and are called, works of the law as long as they are extorted from people only under the coercion of punishments and the threat of God's wrath. Fruits of the Spirit, however, are those works which the Spirit of God, who dwells in the believers, works through the regenerated, and which the regenerated perform in so far as they are reborn..."