

The Lutheran View of Sanctification

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SANCTIFICATION, IF IT IS TO BE SPOKEN OF AS SOMETHING other than justification is perhaps best defined as the art of getting used to the unconditional justification wrought by the grace of God for Jesus' sake. It is what happens when we are grasped by the fact that God alone justifies. It is being made holy, and as such, it is not our work. It is the work of the Spirit who is called Holy. The fact that it is not our work puts the old Adam/Eve (our old self) to death and calls forth a new being in Christ. It is being saved from the sickness unto death and being called to new life.

In German there is a nice play on words which is hard to reproduce in English. Salvation is Das Heil—which gives the sense both of being healed and of being saved. Sanctification is Die Heiligung—which would perhaps best be translated as “being salvationed.” Sanctification is “being salvationed,” the new life arising from the catastrophe suffered by the old upon hearing that God alone saves. It is the pure flower that blossoms in the desert, watered by the unconditional grace of God.

Sanctification is thus simply the art of getting used to justification. It is not something added to justification. It is not the final defense against a justification too liberally granted. It is the justified life. It is what happens when the old being comes up against the end of its self-justifying and self-gratifying ways, however pious. It is life lived in anticipation of the resurrection.

As such, sanctification is likely not the kind of life that we (old beings!) would wish, much as we might prattle piously about it and protest about how necessary it is. For the most part we make the mistake of equating sanctification with what we might call the moral life. As old beings we get nervous when we hear about justification by grace alone, faith alone, and worry that it will lead to moral laxity. So we say we have to “add” sanctification too, or we have to get on to what is really important, living the “sanctified life.” And by that we usually mean living morally.

Now, living morally is indeed an important, wise and good thing. There is no need to knock it. But it should not be equated with sanctification, being made holy. The moral life is the business of the old being in this world. The Reformers called it “civil righteousness.” Sanctification is the result of the dying of the old and the rising of the new. The moral life is the result of the old being's struggle to climb to the heights of the law. Sanctification has to do with the descent of the new being into humanity, becoming a neighbor, freely, spontaneously, giving of the self in self-forgetful and uncalculating ways. “But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (Mt 6:3-4). Sanctification is God's secret, hidden (perhaps especially!) even from the “sanctified.” The last thing the sanctified would do would be to talk about it or make claims about achieving it. One would be more likely, with Paul, to talk about one's weaknesses.

No, sanctification is not the kind of thing we would seek. I expect we don't really want it, and perhaps rarely know when it is happening to us. It is the work of the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life. It is given to us in the buffeting about, the sorrows, the joys, the sufferings and the tasks of daily life. As Ernest Becker rightly put it in his classic work (that ought to be read by everyone interested in the question of “salvationing” today) *The Denial of Death*, the hardest thing is not even the death, but the rebirth, because

it means that for the first time we shall have to be reborn not as gods but as human beings, shorn of all our defenses, projects and claims.¹ Can flowers bloom in this desert? Can we survive and get used to justification? Can we live as though it were true? That is the question.

The Argument

Talk about sanctification is dangerous. It is too seductive for the old being. What seems to have happened in the tradition is that sanctification has been sharply distinguished from justification, and thus separated out as the part of the “salvationing” we are to do. God alone does the justifying simply by declaring the ungodly to be so, for Jesus’ sake. Most everyone is willing to concede that, at least in some fashion. But, of course, then comes the question: what happens next? Must not the justified live properly? Must not justification be safeguarded so it will not be abused? So sanctification enters the picture supposedly to rescue the good ship Salvation from shipwreck on the rocks of Grace Alone. Sanctification, it seems, is our part of the bargain. But, of course, once it is looked on that way, we must be careful not to undo God’s justifying act in Christ. So sanctification must be absolutely separated from justification. God, it seems, does his part, and then we do ours.

The result of this kind of thinking is generally disastrous. We are driven to make an entirely false distinction between justification and sanctification in order to save the investment the old being has in the moral system. Justification is a kind of obligatory religious preliminary which is rendered largely ineffective while we talk about getting on with the truly “serious” business of becoming “sanctified” according to some moral scheme or other. We become the actors in sanctification. This is entirely false. According to Scripture, God is always the acting subject, even in sanctification. The distinction serves only to leave the old being in control of things under the guise of pious talk.

On the level of human understanding, the problem is we attempt to combine the unconditional grace of God with our notions of continuously existing and acting under the law. In other words, the old being does not come up against its death, but goes on pursuing its projects, perhaps a little more morally or piously, but still on its of the old subject and the resurrection of a new one, not the continuous existence of the old. Unconditional grace calls forth a new being in Christ. But the old being sees such unconditional grace as dangerous and so protects its continuity by “adding sanctification.” It seeks to stave off the death involved by becoming “moral.”

Sanctification thus becomes merely another part of its self-defense against grace. Justification is rendered more or less harmless. Talk about sanctification can be dangerous in that it misleads and seduces the old being into thinking it is still in control. We may grudgingly admit we cannot justify ourselves, but then we attempt to make up for that by getting serious about sanctification.

Even under the best of conditions, talk about sanctification in any way apart from justification is dangerous. It has a tendency to become a strictly verbal exercise in which one says obligatory things to show one is “serious about it”—but little comes of the discussion. Perhaps one feels sanctified just by talking impressively about it. The result of such talk is what I like to call “the magnificent hot-air balloon syndrome.” One talks impressively about sanctification, and we all get beguiled by the rhetoric and agree. “Yes, of course, we all ought to do that,” and the balloon begins to rise into the religious stratosphere solely on the strength of its own hot air. It is something like bragging about prowess in love and sex. It is mostly hot air and rarely accomplishes anything more for the hearers than arousing anxiety or creating the illusion

that they somehow can participate vicariously. We got started in that direction even in the above exercise in this thesis when we talked about how sanctification is “spontaneous,” “free,” “self-forgetful,” “self-giving,” “uncalculating” and all those nice things. Dangerous talk. Dangerous because, like love, none of those things can actually be produced by us in any way. Theology indeed obligates us to talk about them, to attempt accurate description, but unless we know the dangers and limitations of such descriptions, it leads only to presumption or despair. So let the reader beware!

And so at the very least, we can say that sanctification cannot in any way be separated from justification. It is not merely a logical mistake, but a spiritually devastating one. In fact, the Scriptures rarely, if ever, treat sanctification as a movement distinct from justification. In writing to the Christians at Corinth, for instance, Paul refers to them as “those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ”; and later, he refers to the God who chooses what is low and despised in the world, even the things that are not, as the source of our life in Christ Jesus, “whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption,” so that whoever boasts should boast in the Lord (1 Cor 1:2, 28-31 RSV).

To the Thessalonians Paul writes that they have been chosen by God from the beginning “to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth” (2 Thess 2:13). Hebrews says that “we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb 10:10 RSV). Sanctification appears in Scripture to be roughly equivalent to other words for the salvation wrought by God in Christ, a phrase which designates another facet or dimension of sanctification, but never calls it something distinct or logically different from justification. J. K. S. Reid is right when he concludes, “It is tempting for the sake of logical neatness to make a clean division between the two [justification and sanctification] but the temptation must be resisted, if in fact the division is absent from Holy Scripture.”²

It is difficult to escape the suspicion that the distinction between justification and sanctification is strictly a dogmatic one made because people got nervous about what would happen when unconditional grace was preached, especially in Reformation times. Doesn’t justification do away with good works? Who will be good if they hear about justification by faith alone? So the anxious questions went. Sanctification was “added” as something distinct in order to save the enterprise from supposed disaster. But dogmatic distinctions don’t save us from disaster. More likely than not, they only make matters worse.

Justification by Faith Alone

It becomes clear, then, that we cannot talk about sanctification without first saying something about justification. The difficulty we have arises because justification by faith alone, without the deeds of the law, is a mighty breakup of the ordinary schemes of morality and religion; a mighty attack, we should say, on the theology of the old being. The fact that we are justified before God—the eternal Judge, Creator and Preserver of all life—unconditionally for Jesus’ sake and by faith alone, simply shatters the old being’s entire system of values and calculations.

As old beings we don’t know what to do with an unconditional gift or promise. Virtually our entire existence in this world is shaped, determined and controlled by conditional promises and calculations. We are brought up on conditional promises. We live by them. Our future is determined by them. Conditional promises always have an “if-then” form.³ If you eat your spinach, then you get your pudding. If you are a good girl, then you can go to the movies. If you do your schoolwork, then you will pass the course. If you

do your job, then you will get your pay. If you prove yourself, then you will get a promotion. And so on and so on, endlessly until at last we die of it, wondering if we had only done this or that differently, perhaps then. . . . Though such conditional promises are often burdensome and even oppressive, they are nevertheless enticing and even comforting in their own way because they give life its structure and seem to grant us a measure of control. If we fulfill the conditions, then we have a claim on what is promised. We have what we call “rights,” and we can control our future, at least to a certain extent.

So, as old beings, we hang rather tenaciously onto these conditional promises. As a matter of fact, that is what largely characterizes our being in this world as old. We hang desperately onto the conditional promises, hoping to control our own destiny. We live “under the law” and cannot get out—because we really don’t want to. We prefer to go our own way even up to the last barrier: death. And there we must either hope that the conditionality ends and all account books simply close, or perhaps we make the fatal mistake of thinking that we can extend our control under the conditional promise even into the beyond. We think we have a claim on heaven itself if the proper conditions are met. Religion is most often just the attempt to extend this conditionality into eternity and to gain a certain measure of control even over the eternal itself.

But the saving act of God in Jesus Christ—comprehended in justification by faith alone—is an unconditional promise. Unconditional promises have a “because-therefore” form. Because Jesus has overcome the world and all enemies by his death and resurrection, therefore (and only for that reason) you shall be saved. Because Jesus died and rose, therefore God here and now declares you just for Jesus’ sake (not even for your sake, but for Jesus’ sake). Because Jesus has borne the sin of the whole world in his body unto death and yet conquered, therefore God declares the forgiveness of our sins.

Now, of course, as old beings we have a desperately difficult time with such an unconditional promise. It knocks everything out of kilter. We simply don’t know how to cope with it, so we are thrown into confusion. Is it really true? Can one announce it just like that? No strings attached? Don’t we have to be more careful about to whom we say such things? It appears wild and dangerous and reckless to us, just as it did to Jesus’ contemporaries. The best we can do is to try to draw it back into our conditional understanding—so all the questions and protests come pouring out. But surely we have to do something, don’t we? Don’t we at least have to make our decision to accept? Isn’t faith, after all, a condition? Or repentance? Isn’t the idea of an unconditional promise terribly dangerous? Who will be good? Won’t it lead perhaps to universalism, libertinism, license and sundry disasters? Don’t we need to insist on sanctification to prevent the whole from collapsing into cheap grace? Doesn’t the Bible follow the declaration of grace with certain exhortations and imperatives? So the protestations go, for the most part designed to reimpose at least a minimal conditionality on the promise.

It is crucial to see that here we have arrived at the decisive point which will entirely determine how we look at what we call sanctification. It is true, you see, that as old beings we simply cannot understand or cope with the unconditional promise of justification pronounced in the name of Jesus. ‘What we don’t see is that what the unconditional promise is calling forth is a new being. The justification of God promised in Jesus is not an “offer” made to us as old beings; it is our end, our death. We are, quite literally, through as old beings. To use the vernacular, we have “had it.” All the questions and protests that we raise are really just the death rattle of the old Adam and Eve who sense that their kingdom is under radical and final attack. No doubt that is why the defense is so desperate, and why it even quite innocently takes such pious and well-meaning forms.

But isn't the unconditional promise dangerous? Of course it is! After all, look what happened to Jesus! It is the death of us one way or another. Either we stick in our conditionality and go to that death which is eternal, or we are put to death to be raised to new and eternal life in the one who lives eternally. The point is that when we come up against the danger and radicality of the unconditional promise, the solution is not to fall back on conditionality but simply to be drawn into the death and resurrection of Jesus. The old being cannot survive the promise, the promise which makes new beings out of nothing. God is the one who calls into being that which is from that which is not. The new being finds its center now not in itself, but in Jesus.

One has only to follow out the argument in Romans to see Paul clearly developing this point. The law, the conditional promise, did not stop sin; it only made it worse. As a matter of fact, the law was given to show sin as sinful beyond measure, a bottomless pit, an endless hall of mirrors. But where sin abounded, grace abounded all the more! But isn't such argument terribly dangerous? Aren't all the careful barriers built against sin suddenly destroyed? Doesn't one come perilously close to saying that sin is somehow presupposed by or even necessary for grace? Couldn't one then justly say, "Well then, shall we not sin the more that grace may abound?" It is a serious question and one that has to be raised. As a matter of fact, if the question isn't raised, one probably hasn't yet grasped the radical hilaritas, the joy of grace. No doubt, it is the old being's last question prior to its death. But what is the answer? It does not lie in returning to the law, to conditionality, but rather in the death of the old.

Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 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. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Rom 6: 1-11)

Actually, all evangelical treatment of sanctification should be little more than comment on this passage. The end to sin is death, not following the law, not moral progress, not even "sanctification" as the old Adam or Eve thinks of it. To sin the more that grace may increase is, of course, absurd and impossible precisely because of the death. To do so would mean to will to return to sin in order to get more grace. That would be like a lover desiring to return to the state of unloving in order to experience falling in love again. Quite impossible! How can one who has died to sin still live in it? The movement is simply irreversible if one catches a glimpse of what the grace is all about.

Furthermore, it is crucial to note that Paul does not tell his readers that they have to get busy now and die. He announces the startling and unconditional fact that we have died. It is not a task to be accomplished. All who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death, so that out of that death may come newness of life, just like and as sure as the resurrection of Christ. Sin is a slavery from which we escape only through that death. Only one who has died is free from sin. There' is no other way. The old self has been crucified so that the sinful body might also be destroyed and we might at last be set free. There is no continuity of the old self to be carried over here. Christ now becomes our life.

Just the sheer and unconditional announcement “You have died!”— the uncompromising insistence that there is nothing to do now, that God has made his last move—just that, and that alone, is what puts the old being to death, precisely because there is nothing for the old being to do. The God who says, “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy,” has decided to do just that through the death and resurrection of Jesus. There is no way for the old being to do anything about such grace. The unconditional justification, the grace itself, slays the old self and destroys its “body of sin” so as to fashion a new one. It is all over! Christ being raised from the dead will never die again. One can’t go back and repeat it. He died to sin once for all, and now he lives to God. Conclusion? You can now only consider yourself dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus!

So, when we come to the decisive and crucial point about justification and the unconditional promise of grace, it is imperative to see that God is at work making new beings through this (to us) shocking act. The answer to all our questions, to the “death rattle” questions of the old Adam or Eve, lies not in falling back on conditionality, but in learning to cope with death and resurrection. All the questions must therefore be answered with a confident yes.

Do you mean to say we don’t have to do anything? Yes! Just listen! Do you mean to say that even faith is not a condition, nor is making our decision, nor repentance? Yes! Faith is a gift. It comes by hearing. It is the Spirit’s work. It is a being grasped by the unconditional promise, a being caught by the sheer newness and joy of it, a being carried by the Word of Grace. But is not such unconditional promise dangerous? Yes, I suppose it is in this evil age. After all, Jesus got killed for it! But God has apparently decided to take the risk, and sealed it by raising Jesus from the dead. “Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you” (Eph 5:14).

But do you mean to say we can’t say no? That kind of question is, of course, the trickiest of the old Adam or Eve. But in spite of everything, it must be answered with a confident yes—from the point of view of the new being. The old Adam or Eve will, of course, only say no, can really only say no. The old Adam or Eve wants to remain in control of the matter and so says no even while wanting to say yes.

So saying no is not an option? Perhaps the best answer would be, “What do you want to do that for?” It would be like arriving at the altar for the wedding and answering the big question. “Do you take...” with, “Do you mean to say I can’t say no?” If we see at all what is going on, we would see that even here the answer finally has got to be yes: “Yes, I don’t see how you can say no!” The new being by definition is one who says yes. One is not forced here, one is made new, saved—heart, soul, mind. One is sanctified in the truth of the unconditional promise of God.

The answer to the persistent questions of the old Adam or Eve is therefore always yes, yes, yes, until at last we die of it and begin to whisper, “Amen! So be it Lord!” Sanctification is a matter of being grasped by the unconditional grace of God and having now to live in that light. It is a matter of getting used to justification.

Simultaneously Just and Sinner

But now we must look a bit closer at how the unconditional promise—justification by faith alone—works in our lives if we are to arrive at an appropriate understanding of what we might call sanctification. The first thing to grasp is, of course, that the unconditional promise works quite differently from a conditional

one. The unconditional promise, the divine decree of justification, grants everything all at once to the faith it creates. We are simply declared just for Jesus' sake. But that means simultaneously that we are revealed to ourselves as sinners. The sin revealed is not just a misdeed, but it is precisely our lack of faith and trust over against the incredible goodness of God. The sin to be ultimately expelled is our lack of trust, our unbelief. All our impetuous questions are shown for what they are: unbelief, our reservations over against the God of grace, our fear of being made new.

And still we ask, Don't we have to do something? You see, that is all we really planned to do—just a little something! We hadn't counted on being made new! Just that, you see, is the sin exposed! Nevertheless, God simply declares us to be just for Jesus' sake because that is the only thing that will help. That act of God itself finally exposes us as sinners, desperately in need of saving. So then, for the time being, we are, as Martin Luther said, *simul justus et peccator*, simultaneously just and sinner. It is the unconditional grace of God that makes us so. In that, we see the truth. And it is in the truth that we are sanctified. The first step on the way of sanctification is to realize that.

This is radically different from our usual, conditional thinking. Conditional thinking is wedded to the schemes of law and progress characteristic of this age. Sin is understood primarily as misdeed or transgression of such a scheme. "Sanctification" is the business of making progress in cutting down on sin according to the scheme. Holiness or righteousness could not be said to exist simultaneously with sin in the same scheme. Righteousness and sin would simply exclude each other. The more righteousness one gains, the less sin there would be. This would be measured by what one does or doesn't do. It would be a matter of works. Grace would then have to be understood as the power to do such works, to achieve such righteousness. The logic would then be that with the help of grace one progressively gains more and more righteousness and thus sins less and less. One strives toward perfection until, theoretically, one would need less and less grace or perhaps finally no more grace at all.

But such conditional schemes pose all sorts of problems for one who wants to think and believe "in the fashion of Scripture," as Luther called it.⁴ In the first place, it doesn't fit with the divine act of justification by grace alone, by faith alone. There is no real place for justification in the scheme. If it comes at the beginning of the scheme, it makes the subsequent progress unnecessary. Why work at becoming just if you are already declared to be so? On the other hand, if justification comes at the end of the scheme, it becomes unnecessary. You don't have to be declared just if you have already become so.

The systematic problem is that both justification by faith alone without the deeds of the law and such a scheme of sanctification cannot possibly coexist together. The tradition no doubt recognized this when it insisted on making a sharp and complete distinction between the two, at least in theory. In actual practice, however, one or the other of them generally comes to be regarded as more or less fictional or dispensable. And more likely than not, it will be justification that is so regarded. It comes to be looked upon as a decree contrary to actual fact, a kind of "as if" theology. We are regarded "as if" we were just. Or perhaps it is a kind of "temporary loan" granted until we actually earn our way. Sanctification according to this scheme takes over the center of the stage as the real and practical business of the Christian.

But this leads only to a further, more personal problem in the life of faith if one becomes honest before God. What if the scheme just doesn't seem to work? This is the much celebrated problem of the "anxious conscience" that bothered Martin Luther. What if one is honest enough to see that one is not actually making the kind of progress the scheme proposes? I am told that grace gives the power to improve, to gain

righteousness and overcome sin. I am told, furthermore, that grace is absolutely free. But what if I go to church to “get grace” and then get up the next morning and see the same old sinner, perhaps even a little bit worse, staring back at me through the mirror? What then? I am told that grace is free, and that there is nothing wrong with the “delivery system.” Not even a bad priest, minister or a faulty church can frustrate or limit the grace of God. But I don’t seem to get better. If I am in any way serious, I can only become more and more anxious. I am told that grace gives one the power to love God. But as a matter of fact I only become more and more resentful of a God who sets up such systems and makes such demands. I don’t seem to grow in love of God. I begin to hate him! The magnificent hot-air balloon bursts.

Now I face the really desperate question: Whose fault is it if the scheme doesn’t work? There are two possibilities. Either I have not properly responded to or cooperated with the free divine grace, or most frightening of all, the God of election who presides over such grace has decided, in my case, not to give it. The scheme leaves me either depending on my own abilities to respond, to remove all obstacles to grace, to “let myself go” and so forth, or it leaves me with the terrors of predestination. Usually, of course, we recoil in horror from the very thought of predestination. We piously wouldn’t want to lay the blame on God—and besides, we would then lose all control of the matter!

So all things considered, we would rather take the blame for the breakdown of the scheme on ourselves. If it didn’t work, it must be because we didn’t do something right. We didn’t repent sincerely enough; we didn’t really and truly seek him; we didn’t wholly give our hearts to Jesus; and so on. But in that case, the more we talk about “free grace” the worse it gets. When the system doesn’t work, “grace is free” turns out to mean that there is no way we can put the blame on grace. But then no matter how much we talk about the grace of God, absolutely everything then depends on us, on our sincerity, our truthfulness, the depth of our feeling, the wholeheartedness of our confession and so on. The system simply turns against us. While we live as old beings in this age, we simply cannot escape the law.

So it is impossible to put God’s unconditional act of justifying sinners for Jesus’ sake alone together with our ideas of progress based on conditions. It doesn’t work either logically or in the life of faith. That is why Martin Luther came to see that we must take a radically different approach. In place of all ordinary understandings of progress and sanctification, the true Christian life begins when we see the simultaneity of sin and righteousness. God begins with us simply by declaring us to be righteous because of Jesus. We begin to see the truth of the situation when we realize that because God had to do that, we must have been at the same time sinners. God would be wasting his breath declaring people to be righteous if they were not actually and wholly sinners! Indeed, as Paul put it, “if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” (Gal 2:21).

And there can be no cheating here. Since the declaration of God is total, and depends totally on what Jesus has accomplished for us, the sin simultaneously exposed is total. All the dreams, schemes and pretensions of the old Adam or Eve are unmasked in their totality. Sin, as a total state, can only be fought by faith in the total and unconditionally given righteousness. Anything other than that would lead only to hypocrisy or despair. If there is to be anything like true sanctification, it must begin with these considerations.

If our righteousness depends totally on Jesus, and is appropriated only in the relationship of trust (faith), then we can begin to see that God has two problems with us. The relationship can be broken in two ways. The first would be by our failure, our immorality, our vices. Since we lack faith and hope in God’s cause, the relationship is threatened or broken; we go our own way. That problem is usually quite obvious. But the

second problem is not so obvious. It is precisely our supposed success, even our “morality,” our virtues—the relationship with God is broken to the degree that we think we don’t need the unconditional justification, or perhaps even to the degree that we think we are going to use God to achieve our own ideas of sanctity. The relationship is broken precisely because we think it is our holiness.

The first problem, our failure and immorality, is usually most easily recognized and generally condemned because it has consequences, both personally and socially. But the second problem, while generally approved in human eyes because it is advantageous and socially useful, is more dangerous before God (*coram deo*, as Luther put it) precisely because it is praised and sought after. It is the kind of hypocrisy Jesus criticized so vehemently in the gospels: “like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean” (Mt 23:27). No matter how good and useful such virtue is in the world (and we must not fail to see that it is really so and does have its place), it cannot be counted as sanctification. Those who blow their own horns when they give alms so as to be seen and admired by the public do indeed have their reward: the praise of others. But that is all they get. True sanctification is God’s secret (Mt 6:2-4).

So the first step on the way to sanctification is to see that, before the judgment of God as it comes through the crucified and risen Jesus, we are rendered totally just at the same time as we are exposed totally as sinners. Sanctification is thus included in justification as a total state. True sanctification is at the outset simply to believe that God has taken charge of the matter. ‘Where can there be more holiness than where God is revered and worshiped as the only Holy One? But God is revered as the only Holy One where the sinner, the real and total sinner, stands still and listens to God. There the sinner must realize that his or her ways are at an end. The final assault is under way. There the sinner begins to realize that neither virtue nor vice, morality nor immorality, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything before God, but what matters is the new creation (Gal 6:15). Sanctification is not a repair job. God is after something new. He wants his creation back as new as when it came from his hand.

Progress in Sanctification: The Invasion of the New

But is there not such a thing as growth in sanctification, progress in the Christian life? No doubt there is a sense in which we can and even should speak in such fashion. But when we do, we must take care, if everything we have been saying up to this point is true. If justification by faith alone rejects all ordinary schemes of progress and renders us simultaneously just and sinners, we have to look at growth and progress in quite a different light.

That brings us back to our thesis: sanctification is the art of getting used to justification. There is a kind of growth and progress, it is to be hoped, but it is growth in grace—a growth in coming to be captivated more and more, if we can so speak, by the totality, the unconditionality of the grace of God. It is a matter of getting used to the fact that if we are to be saved it will have to be by grace alone. We should make no mistake about it: sin is to be conquered and expelled. But if we see that sin is the total state of standing against the unconditional grace and goodness of God, if sin is our very incredulity, unbelief, mistrust, our insistence on falling back on our self and maintaining control, then it is only through the total grace of God that sin comes under attack, and only through faith in that total grace that sin is defeated. To repeat: sin is not defeated by a repair job, but by dying and being raised new.

So it is always as a totality that unconditional grace attacks sin. That is why total sanctification and justification are in essence the same thing. The total sinner comes under the attack of the total gift. That is how the battle begins. How then can we talk about the progress of the battle—the transition, let us call it—from sin to righteousness, old to new?

There are, I believe, two aspects of this transition we need to talk about. The first is that since we always are confronted and given grace as a totality, we find ourselves always starting fresh. As Luther put it, “To progress is always to begin again.”⁵ In this life, we never quite get over grace, we never entirely grasp it, we never really learn it. It always takes us by surprise. Again and again we have to be conquered and captivated by its totality. The transition will never be completed this side of the grave. The Christian can never presume to be on the glory road, nor to reach a stage, which now forms the basis for the next stage, which can be left behind. The Christian who is grasped by the totality of grace always discovers the miracle anew. One is always at a new beginning. Grace is new everyday. Like the manna in the wilderness, it can never be bottled or stored. Yesterday’s grace turns to poison. By the same token, however, the Christian never has an endless process of sanctification to traverse. Since the totality is given, one knows that one has arrived. Christ carries the Christian totally.

Looked at from Luther’s point of view of “always beginning again,” the transition is therefore not a continuous or steady progress of the sort we could recognize. It is rather more like an oscillation between beginning and end in which both are always equally near. The end, the total gift, is constantly and steadily given. But to grasp that we have constantly to begin again—we never can get over it! It is like lovers who just can’t get over the miracle of the gift of love and so are constantly saying it over and over again as though it were completely new and previously unheard of! And so it constantly begins again.

The second aspect of the transition of the Christian from old to death to life, is that all our ordinary views of progress and growth are turned upside down. It is not that we are somehow moving toward the goal, but rather that the goal is moving closer and closer to us. This corresponds to the eschatological nature of the New Testament message. It is the coming of the kingdom upon us, not our coming closer to or building up the kingdom. That is why it is a growth in grace, not a growth in our own virtue or morality. The progress, if one can call it that, is that we are being shaped more and more by the totality of the grace coming to us. The progress is due to the steady invasion of the new. That means that we are being taken more and more off our own hands, more and more away from self, and getting used to the idea of being saved by the grace of God alone. Our sanctification consists merely in being shaped by, or getting used to, justification.

Getting used to justification means that the old Adam or Eve is being put to death, and thus, as Paul put it, “being freed from sin.” How might we conceive of this? Here we must be careful lest in our attempts to describe the matter we once again get seduced into inflating the magnificent hot-air balloon. Being freed from sin by the unconditional promise means that the totality of it begins to overwhelm and destroy our fundamental scepticism and incredulity, our unbelief. Lord, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief?” becomes our prayer (Mk 9:24). We can see light at the end of the tunnel. We begin to trust God rather than ourselves. When Martin Luther talked about these things, he began to talk more about our actual affections than lists of pious things to do.

Under the pressure of the total gift, we might actually begin to love God as God, our God, and to hate sin. Think of it: We might actually begin to dislike sin and to hope for its eventual removal. Ordinarily we feel guilty about our sins and fear their consequences, but we are far from hating them. I expect we do them, in

spite of all fears and anxieties, because we like them. Sanctification under the invasion of the new, however, holds out the possibility of actually coming to hate sin, and to love God and his creation, or at least to make that little beginning. It is not that sin is taken away from us, but rather that we are to be taken away from sin—heart, soul and mind, as Luther put it.⁶ In that manner, the law of God is to be fulfilled in us precisely by the uncompromising totality and unconditionality of the grace given.

Sanctification always comes from the whole, the totality. Whether it takes place in little steps, in isolated actions against particular sins, in those tender beginnings, it is always because of the invasion of the new. Always the totality is intensively there—the total crisis, the entire transition, the dying and becoming new.

What is the result of this? It should lead, I expect, to something of a reversal in our view of the Christian life. Instead of viewing ourselves on some kind of journey upward toward heaven, virtue and morality, our sanctification would be viewed more in terms of our journey back down to earth, the business of becoming human, the kind of creature God made. Our problem is that we have succumbed to the serpent's temptation, "You shall not die, you shall be as gods." Creation is not good enough for us; we are always on our way somewhere else. So we even look on sanctification in that light—our "progress" toward being "gods" of some sort. If what we have been saying is true, however, our salvation, our sanctification, consists in turning about and going the other way, getting back down to earth. The trouble we have is that it is a long way back for us. To get there we must learn to trust God, to be grasped by the totality of his grace, to become a creature, to become human.

What might that look like? When I think about such sanctification, I think about several things: spontaneity, taking care, vocation and attaining a certain elusive kind of truthfulness and lucidity about oneself. Perhaps I can end by saying a few words about these things.

Spontaneity What is a truly good work, one that might qualify as the fruit of sanctification? One, I think, that is free, uncalculating, genuine, spontaneous. It would be like a mother who runs to pick up her child when it is hurt. There is no calculation, no wondering about progress, morality or virtue. There is just the doing of it, and then it is completely forgotten. The right hand doesn't know what the left is doing. Good works in God's eyes are quite likely to be all those things we have forgotten! True sanctification is God's secret.

Taking Care If we are turned around to get back down to earth by grace, then it would seem that true sanctification would show itself in taking care of our neighbor and God's creation, not exploiting and destroying either for our own ends, religious or otherwise. It would mean concern for the neighbor and society, caring for the other for the time being. Here one should talk about the place of morality and virtue and such things. Although we do not accept them as the means by which we are sanctified, they are the means by which and through which we care for the world and for the other. This is what the Reformers meant when they insisted that good works were to be done, but one was not to depend on them for salvation.

Vocation

How does the one who has died and is being made new, the one who has been taken off his or her own hands, enter into the battle in this world? The answer comes in the concept of carrying out one's vocation as a Christian in the tasks and occupations of daily life. We always get nervous about what we are to do, it

seems. The magnificent hot-air balloon syndrome seduces us into thinking our sanctification consists in following lists of pious dos and don'ts. That always seems more holy. But it is in the nitty-gritty of daily life and its tasks that our sanctification is hammered out.

Precisely because of the totality of the gift, the new being knows that there is nothing to do to gain heaven. Thus the Christian is called to the tasks of daily life in this world, for the time being. Students, for instance, are sometimes very pious and idealistic about "doing something," and so get caught up in this or that movement "for good." It never seems to dawn on them that perhaps for the time being, at least, their calling is simply to be a good student! It is not particularly in acts of piety that we are sanctified, but in our call to live and act as Christians.

Truthfulness and Lucidity In many ways, this essay has been an appeal for more truthfulness in our talk about the Christian life and sanctification. I think that should be the mark of sanctification as well. As Paul put it, we are not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought (Rom 12:3).

The talk of progress and growth we usually indulge in leads us all too often to do just that. But if we are saved and sanctified only by the unconditional grace of God, we ought to be able to become more truthful and lucid about the way things really are with us. Am I making progress? If I am really honest, it seems to me that the question is odd, even a little ridiculous. As I get older and death draws nearer, it doesn't seem to get any easier. I get a little more impatient, a little more anxious about having perhaps missed what this life has to offer, a little slower, harder to move, a little more sedentary and set in my ways. It seems more and more unjust to me that now that I have spent a good part of my life "getting to the top," and I seem just about to have made it, I am already slowing down, already on the way out. A skiing injury from when I was sixteen years old acts up if I overexert myself. I am too heavy, the doctors tell me, but it is so hard to lose weight! Am I making progress? Well, maybe it seems as though I sin less, but that may only be because I'm getting tired! It's just too hard to keep indulging the lusts of youth. Is that sanctification? I wouldn't think so! One should not, I expect, mistake encroaching senility for sanctification!

But can it be, perhaps, that it is precisely the unconditional gift of grace that helps me to see and admit all that? I hope so. The grace of God should lead us to see the truth about ourselves, and to gain a certain lucidity, a certain sense of humor, a certain down-to-earthiness. When we come to realize that if we are going to be saved, it shall have to be absolutely by grace alone, then we shall be sanctified. God will have his way with us at last.

Notes

1 Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973), p. 58.

2 Alan Richardson, ed., *A Theological Wordbook of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), p. 218.

3 Eric Gritsch and Robert Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress, 1976), pp. 8, 42.

4 Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, trans. and ed. Wilhelm Pauck, The Library of Christian Classics, vol. 15 (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster, 1961), p. 128.

5 Ibid., p. 370.

6 Ibid., p. 194.