

1-1-1984

## Luther on sanctification: humility and courage

Egil Grislis

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

---

### Recommended Citation

Grislis, Egil (1984) "Luther on sanctification: humility and courage," *Consensus*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol10/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact [scholarscommons@wlu.ca](mailto:scholarscommons@wlu.ca).

# LUTHER ON SANCTIFICATION: HUMILITY AND COURAGE

*Egil Grislis*

Luther's doctrine of sanctification is patterned after the theology of the cross and hence earmarked by humility and faithful courage. As there is no glory to be obtained in bypassing the agony of the cross, and as all authentic glory is experienced only through the suffering of the cross — so also sanctification is not a separate and higher step beyond justification, but only a distinctive dimension experienced in the very midst of justification. Those who have imagined sanctification as a new realm for the efforts of the saved, and have desired to measure the various degrees of perfection achieved through such effort, have been visibly disappointed in Luther. Claims have been made that Luther does not teach a doctrine of sanctification, and, worse yet,

---

The author's gratitude is expressed to the Faculty Fellowship Division of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada which has enabled the research for this study.

that he despises sanctification.<sup>1</sup> That is certainly not the case. What is true is this: with a robust, at times even coarse, attention to the presence of sin in the justified Christian, Luther has often succeeded in truly highlighting the universal human condition, emphasizing its misery more than its grandeur. An eminently successful diagnostician, Luther has identified the chronic ills of the human soul, and outlined a life-style in which redemption may be obtained, thus always acknowledging and at times clearly formulating this process of spiritual healing called sanctification.

Programmatically, Luther's view can be recorded in a very brief formula according to his own words: "Christ did not earn only *gratia*, 'grace,' for us, but also *donum*, 'the gift of the Holy Spirit,' so that we might have not only forgiveness of, but also cessation of, sin."<sup>2</sup> In this way while acknowledging the grace of justification which accepts us as righteous, Luther also underscores the effective bestowing of the Holy Spirit. Hence sin is removed step-by-step, and the process of sanctification goes on. Therefore, whatever else is said, the reality of this process is undeniable. "Now he who does not abstain from sin, but persists in his evil life, must have a different Christ, that of the Antinomians . . ."<sup>3</sup>

## I

While Luther's recovery of the meaning of justification by grace through faith has been praised often, and is, without a doubt, his central insight, we need to begin at the beginning, which is Luther's grasp of the meaning of sin. Admittedly, this grasp had an autobiographical setting. While struggling for perfection during his early days in the monastery,<sup>4</sup> Luther discovered the depths of his own imperfection and thus the powerful hold of sin on his own life. Through understanding himself, Luther began to understand others as well. Once Luther mused, "We have hardly passed our fifth year when we look for idleness, play, wantonness, and pleasures, but shun discipline, shake off obedience, and hate all virtues, but especially the higher ones of truth and justice."<sup>5</sup> At the same time, Luther knew, the sinner is completely unaware of the true character of sin. "This is truly the nature of sin, that it lies there like a slumbering beast while it is being committed; that is, it does not bite, it does not frighten, and it does not torment, but it rather fawns".<sup>6</sup> Moreover, sin is not merely

---

1. Even the otherwise scholarly and fair John S. Oyer, *Lutheran Reformers Against Anabaptists* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), p. 219, laments that Luther's "declarations on the necessity of works, and the nature of those that ought to be performed, are not numerous." When describing the viewpoint of the 16th century Anabaptists, Oyer notes, p. 222: "Essentially Lutheran faith was erroneous because it was unfruitful. Those who adhered to its tenets continued to live in sin. There was no effort to unify faith and the new life in Christ, and this could only mean that the faith was false." Harry Loewen, *Luther and the Radicals* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University, 1974), also observes: "The Anabaptists believed that Luther's great emphasis on justification by faith alone frequently led to loose morals among the Lutherans." Loewen ably defends Luther against such charges.

2. *L W* 41:114.

3. *L W* 41:114.

4. Cf. Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (N.Y.: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1950), p. 37 ff.; Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Mensch zwischen Gott und Teufel* (Berlin: Severin & Siedler, 1981), p. 135 ff.

5. *L W* 2:126.

6. *L W* 1:266, cf. 1:267-268.

an external force that has only partially affected us. Rather, the unredeemed person is totally “flesh”,<sup>7</sup> that is, selfish and sinful in its loftiest accomplishments. “. . . we are so far from being able to know our sins, not to mention confessing them, that even our good works are damnable and mortal if God were to judge them severely and not acknowledge them with forgiving mercy.”<sup>8</sup> A good case in point is our perennial readiness to judge others! In the following statement Luther charges the papists: “If we made a human mistake—and indeed we are weak and have our failings—then they plunge into our dirt like hungry swine and make it an object of delight . . .”<sup>9</sup> In his more objective moments, of course, Luther knows that such is the behaviour of all sinful humanity. Even “the saints frequently err and are a stumbling block with human doctrines and words.”<sup>10</sup> More precisely, the power of sin is not yet totally broken even within the saints. Yet the struggle with sin continues and there are moments of victory as well as defeat. “Experience, too, teaches that even the saints remain steadfast only with difficulty and are often involved even in flagrant sins when they are overcome by the wickedness of nature.”<sup>11</sup>

The significance of the sin of the saints is at least twofold. On the one hand, as we have already noted, the sins of the saints bring to our attention the total depravity of all mankind. They present to us a living example to which Jesus Christ is the only exception. On the other hand, however, the transgressions of the saints have a positive message for us, fellow sinners. Namely, with the help of grace even sinning can become an occasion for spiritual growth. Luther writes, “The saints do not fall in order to perish; they fall in order that God may bestow rich blessing on them by heaping greater benefits on them . . . Because when a godly person is aware of his fall, he becomes ashamed and is perturbed. Thus his fall leads first to humility and then also to fervent prayer.”<sup>12</sup> In another passage Luther puts it in this way, “But God is wonderful in His saints, and so wonderful that through their failings and errors He manifests His wisdom to us.”<sup>13</sup> This surely is not a license to sin, but a somber warning. “What hope would be left for us if Peter had not denied Christ and all the apostles had not taken offense at Him, and if Moses, Aaron, and David had not fallen? Therefore God wanted to console sinners with these examples and to say: ‘If you have fallen, return; for the door of mercy is open to you. You, who are conscious of no sin, do not be presumptuous; but both of you should trust in My grace and mercy’.”<sup>14</sup>

Obviously, Luther’s vivid accounts of sin in Christian existence are not intended to teach us how to live with sin, but rather how to recognize and avoid sin. Hence Luther’s observations of the depth of human depravity go hand-in-hand with the affirmations of the redeeming power of God. Programmatically, Luther notes, “This is a common fault of our nature. Unless it is restrained by the Holy Spirit, it cannot keep

7. Erdmann Schott, *Fleisch und Geist nach Luthers Lehre* (1929, rpr. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1969).

8. *L W* 39:35

9. *L W* 2:168-169, cf. 2:170-171.

10. *L W* 52:191.

11. *L W* 2:128, cf. 5:255.

12. *L W* 3:334.

13. *L W* 4:14.

14. *L W* 7:11.



from becoming puffed up by the gifts that God has bestowed upon it.”<sup>15</sup> And there is no way to eradicate completely this “common fault”. Luther insists repeatedly that “. . . sin remains in the baptized and the saints as long as they are flesh and blood and live on earth.”<sup>16</sup> Yet such insistence is not really defeatist; rather it reflects Luther’s ever courageous hope for victory. “Once a Christian is righteous by faith and has accepted the forgiveness of sins, he should not be so smug, as though he were pure of sins. For only then does he face the constant battle with the remnants of sin . . .”<sup>17</sup>

The battle takes place on several levels. Most obviously and therefore also generally, Luther notes that “gross sinners can certainly be reformed, at least with punishments . . .”<sup>18</sup> Such outward morality, established by force, of course, does not bring about an inner moral renewal. With a touch of sadness, Luther notes, “But saintlets and spiritual sinners cannot be reformed; for they do not acknowledge their sins . . .”<sup>19</sup> Such people God educates by way of the necessary tribulations (*Anfechtungen*).<sup>20</sup> This education is often painful, since through it God “tries to purge our impure nature. This is what He thinks: ‘You have been enlightened and baptized; but *you still stink*, and your flesh is full of many great vices . . .’”<sup>21</sup> Therefore, to help us grow, God acts according to the principle, “The dearer the child, the sharper the rods.”<sup>22</sup> Sometimes the rods are very sharp indeed: “Accordingly, God is playing a fatherly game with us when He sends plague, famine, diseases, sadness of spirit, misfortune to a son, and all kinds of evils in this whole life for the purpose of melting and purging.”<sup>23</sup> But while God thus heals our souls step-by-step, Luther—despite his overstated emphasis on human passivity in the *On the Bondage of the Will*<sup>24</sup>—envisions these occasions as authentic opportunities for accepting the proffers of God’s sanctifying grace. When such opportunities are missed and growth does not take place, the fault lies with the sinner. For example, on occasion Luther can inform us, “Baptized or not, therefore, no greedy belly can be a Christian.”<sup>25</sup> The authentic, though partial, eradication of sins in the life of the Christian can also be affirmed positively. “Faith will not allow you to be a sinner, fornicator, or adulterer; henceforth your life will reflect the quality of your heart.”<sup>26</sup> That is to say, as sin is overcome in the daily struggles, Luther envisions a redirection of our efforts from the self to the care for others. At the same time, the very paradox of justification remains: man is *simul iustus et peccator*.

While the checklist of no-longer-committed-sins grows in length, two observations remain valid. First, even the believer is entangled in sin and often succumbs to it. Se-

---

15. *L W* 2:5.

16. *L W* 32:20.

17. *L W* 12:328.

18. *L W* 16:11.

19. *L W* 16:11.

20. *L W* 3:9; 6:256; 20:31.

21. *L W* 7:229.

22. *L W* 7:231, cf. 7:254.

23. *L W* 7:231.

24. Martin Seils, *Der Gedanke vom Zusammenwirken Gottes und des Menschen in Luthers Theologie* (Guetersloh: Guetersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1962).

25. *L W* 21:201.

26. *L W* 22:374.

cond, as grace frees from particular sins, faith leads on to love—and not to further sinning. Luther puts it this way, “Nothing is easier than sinning. But to be born of God and to sin are incompatible. While the birth remains, and so long as the seed of God abides in a person who has been born again, he cannot sin.”<sup>27</sup>

Clearly, Luther knows that grace and sin are not compatible. His theology attempts both to reveal this incompatibility and at the same time to acknowledge the obvious fact that saints do commit sin. Such an observation, however, does not lead Luther to accept sin and sinful existence, but valiantly to rely on grace and to struggle against sin with perseverance and courage.

## II

Whenever Luther’s courageous struggle against sin takes the form of attacking oversimplifications of sanctification as an expression of sin, a mistaken impression can be received that Luther is rejecting the very idea of sanctification! Moreover, the portrait of Luther as the critic of other peoples’ religion is not very pleasing for this ecumenical age. Surely there would be gentler and more polite ways of speaking! But as Luther saw the situation, he was engaged in a life-or-death struggle against Roman Catholics and the Anabaptists. We in the twentieth century, of course, are engaged in a life-or-death struggle against all modern forms of unbelief. Our former enemies have become our faithful allies; to attack them is spiritual treason and folly at the same time. Thus it is with authentic apologies that we visit the ancient battle ground.

The point of the conflict was the role of good works.<sup>28</sup> Luther’s early and vigorous assertions of *sola gratia* and *sola fides* were mistakenly understood as counsels for quietism and antinomianism. Soon enough, however, Luther made it clear that *sola gratia* was fully compatible with human activity and, in fact, demanded it. Luther wrote, “For where the Word of God is, there one also finds true faith and true works . . .”<sup>29</sup> “But when the heart takes hold of the Word, then the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit follows, and the power and might to do amazing things.”<sup>30</sup> “After a man has been justified by faith, it is inevitable that the fruits of justification follow, since a good tree is not able not to bear good fruits, and a bad tree bad fruits, as Christ says (Matt. 7:18).”<sup>31</sup> “Where there is a genuine faith, there good works will certainly follow, too.”<sup>32</sup>

At the same time, as Luther had become only too well aware, to state the basic principle does not always suffice. People misunderstand; so Luther complains, “If we teach that nothing but faith justifies, then wicked people neglect all works. On the other hand, if we teach that faith must be attested by works, they immediately attribute justification to these. A fool always veers to one or the other extreme.”<sup>33</sup> And, as Luther saw it, there were many such fools around; they read Luther and declared

---

27. L W 30:273.

28. Ragnar Bring, *Das Verhaeltnis von Glauben und Werken in der lutherischen Theologie* (Muenchen: Chr. Kaiser, 1955).

29. L W 5:4.

30. L W 5:133.

31. L W 19:23.

32. L W 21:150.

33. L W 15:111.

that while *sola gratia* is taught, good works are neglected! Therefore Luther continues insisting, “Your faith . . . must be of the sort that abounds in good works.”<sup>34</sup> “Faith must be taken so seriously that it cannot remain without good works.”<sup>35</sup> Can this insight be stated more clearly than in the following assertion?—“Now we do not tell people to believe that all is done when we believe, and that we need not do good works. No, we must not divorce the two. You must perform good works and do good to your neighbor at all times, so that the inner faith of your heart may glow outwardly and be reflected in your life.”<sup>36</sup> At the same time Luther is also very clear that the ultimate initiative to do good works always comes from God. “Once you have become a Christian, the Holy Spirit impels you to perform good works.”<sup>37</sup> “Unless these works do follow faith,” proclaims Luther, “this is the surest possible sign that the faith is not genuine.”<sup>38</sup> After all, stresses Luther, “Works are only the fruits of faith.”<sup>39</sup> Consequently, Luther can demand, “Therefore link faith and good works together in such a way that both make up the sum total of the Christian life.”<sup>40</sup> Where this is not the case, sin has undoubtedly gained the final victory. (At times Luther’s description of such sinners is unquotably coarse. Speaking about lazy monks and priests, Luther says: “They are lap dogs that lie on pillows and whistle with their hind ends.”<sup>41</sup>)

Generally Luther does not undertake to enumerate either particular sins or good works. Nor does Luther single out any one profession in which the process of sanctification can best take place, but merely asserts in accord with his doctrine of vocation: “God wants no lazy idlers. Men should work diligently and faithfully, each according to his calling and profession, and then God will give blessing and success.”<sup>42</sup> Indeed, proclaims Luther: “. . . a woman suckling an infant or a maid sweeping a threshing floor with a broom is just as pleasing to God as an idle nun or a lazy Carthusian.”<sup>43</sup> On another occasion Luther exclaims, “How much more proper your conduct would be, Francis, Dominic, and all you popes and cardinals, if you milked cows, swept the house, or discharged any duties whatever in the administration of a household!”<sup>44</sup> By contrast, to insinuate that one’s calling is extra-special and more saintly, is an open confession of unbelief. Pre-ecumenically, Luther placed such a charge against his clerical opponents. “This is really a holy man! . . . You are simply doubling your desperate wickedness when you make people stare open-mouthed at your disguise. Otherwise you have to say: ‘If a farmer plowing or spreading manure on his field is no less a Christian and no less entitled to get to heaven than I, what am I accomplishing by my special way of life?’”<sup>45</sup>

Luther was not merely coarse. He was clearly calling attention to the fact that sanc-

---

34. *L W* 22:374.

35. *L W* 22:393.

36. *L W* 23:110.

37. *L W* 23:184.

38. *L W* 27:127.

39. *L W* 30:34.

40. *L W* 30:34.

41. *L W* 13:56.

42. *L W* 14:115.

43. *L W* 6:348.

44. *L W* 8:60.

45. *L W* 21:255.



tification had been misunderstood within the late medieval monastic devotion—whenever the church celebrated the accomplishments of “Francis, Dominic, and Augustine” with only a faint realization that God was the ultimate author of the virtues of these saints.<sup>46</sup> Luther had a point in scorning the unfortunate fact that “they even venerated St. Francis’ underclothing” (kept by Frederick the Wise in his collection of relics at Wittenberg).<sup>47</sup> Luther was right when he warned, “It may be that Anthony and other hermits were saintly men; but you are committing a grave sin if you abandon your calling and follow their example by secluding yourself in a hiding place; for what the Lord has commanded you to do is something else, namely, to obey your parents, the government, and your teachers.”<sup>48</sup> Most important, it was appropriate for Luther to question the degree to which monastic piety—as the road to sanctification—followed scriptural teaching. Luther wrote, “No, Christ did not command the wearing of a grey cowl, though St. Francis thought it was a good idea. But what if the Holy Spirit did not inspire him to do this, but the old Adam, who always tries to be clever in spiritual matters?”<sup>49</sup>

More broadly, Luther warned against “all the self-righteous, who toil and deprive themselves of food and drink and exhaust their strength in a matter that is of no consequence. They are the devil’s martyrs. They work harder to get to hell than we to heaven.”<sup>50</sup> Obviously, Luther had encountered the “counterfeit saint” face-to-face and now describes him as follows: “His self-made holiness makes him so proud that he despises everyone else and cannot have a kind and merciful heart.”<sup>51</sup> On another occasion Luther recalls a superstitious man who was “afraid to kill lice and fleas. And I have seen a priest who thought that he was pleasing God by the very act of sparing those vermin. For he did not clean his clothing but put the lice that had been removed back into his cowl and added as his reason for this filthiness the knowledge that his parents were also being nibbled at and eaten by worms in the grave.”<sup>52</sup> On the basis of his experience with such people, Luther generalizes, “One of the virtues of counterfeit sanctity is that it cannot have pity or mercy for the frail and weak, but insists on the strictest enforcement and the purest selection; as soon as there is even a minor flaw, all mercy is gone, and there is nothing but fuming and fury.”<sup>53</sup> Elsewhere Luther speaks of “the miserable saints who do not come to forgive or forget their neighbor’s sin. It is in their nature never to be well disposed in their heart toward any person.”<sup>54</sup>

While Luther could learn from the theology of St. Augustine, admire the piety of St. Bernard, respect St. Bonaventure (and doubt that St. Thomas Aquinas would be among the saved<sup>55</sup>), he judged the essence of Catholic practice of sanctification not by the best but by the very worst examples he had seen. Not surprisingly, the judg-

---

46. *L W* 2:249.

47. *L W* 34:26, cf. *W A* 30,II, 265, n. 91.

48. *L W* 3:131.

49. *L W* 22:261.

50. *L W* 17:110-111.

51. *L W* 21:30.

52. *L W* 8:172-173.

53. *L W* 21:29.

54. *L W* 42:67.

55. *L W* 32:158.



ment was harsh indeed. But did all “monks, like swine, look for abundant food in monasteries?”<sup>56</sup> Was it invariably true that “instead of sickness and wounds our boasters of poverty carry about a sleek skin and stuffed flesh, worse than the profligates and harlots . . .?”<sup>57</sup> Can the monastic idealism and quest for sanctification really be summed up that quickly? “A monk thinks that he presents the greatest service to God when he changes his clothing, abandons his calling, and withdraws into a monastery, where he eats, drinks, and sleeps in a new way?”<sup>58</sup>

That Luther identified his own former life with such aberrations,<sup>59</sup> suggests that perhaps he was thinking more of some deeper transgressions, namely the attempts to build sanctification on human merit—defined not as a gift of grace (so St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas<sup>60</sup>), but seen as simple human work righteousness. Luther condemned precisely this work righteousness, and pointed out why he had done so. “If our situation depends on merits, we can never be sure that we have enough merits. Thus we can never be without the danger of damnation. What, then, prompts the papists to rely on works and merits rather than on the promise and grace?”<sup>61</sup> Ultimately Luther blamed the pope, who should have but had not corrected the error. “Thus the pope taught holiness after he had thrust aside the Word and the Spirit. He taught that after Baptism, when they had grown up, Christians should enter monasteries, torment the body, and render satisfaction for their sins. Similarly, the Turks, too, have a variety of works and exercises on account of which they boast that they are saintly; but it is only the semblance and name of saintliness, under which horrible faults are hidden.”<sup>62</sup> Consequently, to Luther “the pope and Turk” were “the Antichrist.”<sup>63</sup> Needless to say, Luther employed other epithets as well. In moments of anger, Luther shouted, “Yes, to the gallows with the pope!”<sup>64</sup> And in his very last sermon, preached in 1546 in Eisleben, Luther spoke of the Devil and then pointed out, “There sits the decoy duck in Rome with his bag of tricks, luring to himself the whole world with its money and goods . . .”<sup>65</sup>

Of course, Luther’s other opponents fared only slightly better; but he accused them of work righteousness as well. “For today both the Anabaptists and the Sacramentarians despise the Word and neglect the doctrine of faith. Meanwhile they manifest the greatest show of devotion and respectability. I hear that there is very strict discipline among the Swiss. They do not play, do not gormandize, and do not give themselves up to luxury and clothing, in feasts, etc. This is their religion, and they are proud of it. They boast that they excel us by far. But where is the Word?”<sup>66</sup> With a

---

56. *L W* 2:270.

57. *L W* 9:147.

58. *L W* 12:86.

59. *L W* 3:284.

60. St. Augustine, “On the Proceedings of Pelagius” ch. 36, “thy merits are the gifts of God!” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 5:199 cf. 5:247. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, 114, 1-10.

61. *L W* 4:60.

62. *L W* 4:242.

63. *L W* 3:121.

64. *L W* 22:435.

65. *L W* 51:391.

66. *L W* 8:133.

similar contempt, Luther labelled the Anabaptists “crazy saints”<sup>67</sup> and “the new monks”.<sup>68</sup>

### III

The rejection of sanctification as a human accomplishment completed with gusto (if not always with graciousness towards his opponents), Luther turned to *sola gratia* and attempted to describe the process of sanctification by the concepts available to him. The necessity for the Christian to be continuously active we have already pointed out as one of Luther’s significant insights. “Since faith cannot be idle, it must demonstrate the fruits of love by doing good and avoiding evil.”<sup>69</sup> At the same time, authentic believers whom Luther is prepared to call “saints”<sup>70</sup> are “so wise through faith that they depend solely upon the mercy of God and regard their works as nothing; indeed, they confess from the bottom of their hearts that they are simply useless works and sins.”<sup>71</sup> In doing so the “saints” employ no clever scheme, but show true humility. As we have already noted, for the identification of good works Luther could point to the ordinary duties of one’s calling. Yet this does not prevent him from an occasional enumeration. Then Luther suggests that good works are, “To be chaste, to love and to help the neighbor, to refrain from lying, from deceit, from stealing, from murder, from vengefulness, and avenging oneself, etc.”<sup>72</sup> Most reliably and broadly, however, the truly good works are identified in the Scripture. “The first thing to know is that there are no good works except those works God has commanded, just as there is no sin except that which God has forbidden.”<sup>73</sup> Since Luther is not a biblicist, he does not demand a Scripture quotation before one can act in a Christian manner. Luther suggests only the following: good works “result from the Word and are done in faith.” Then they are “perfect in the eyes of God.”<sup>74</sup> At times Luther extends even this broad definition into a still broader one. “Whatever a godly man does, he does rightly, even if he makes a mistake; for he has a heart that is right, and God looks mainly at this.”<sup>75</sup> Clearly, the goodness of a particular work is not measured by the results, but by the intention. Elaborating this insight Luther can say that “God controls and blesses the mistakes of the godly” and point to his own “very great indiscretions and foolish acts” as examples.<sup>76</sup> The principle of such occurrences, according to Luther, has been established by the will of God. “Great saints must make great mistakes in order that God may testify that He wants all men to be humiliated and contained in the catalog of sinners, and that when they have

67. *L W* 21:15.

68. *L W* 21:259.

69. *L W* 38:126.

70. Luther was prepared to state that all Christians were holy, *L W* 30:7, 14:222, but sometimes preferred “Christian brother” to ‘saint’, 29:96. Luther objected to the labelling of some famous Christians as “holy”, notably “Jerome or Paul”. He wrote: “In themselves they are sinners, and only God is holy, as the church sings”, 12:325.

71. *L W* 36:187.

72. *L W* 40:277.

73. *L W* 44:23.

74. *L W* 3:318.

75. *L W* 4:85.

76. *L W* 5:121.

acknowledged and confessed this, they may find grace and mercy.”<sup>77</sup>

Consequently, insists Luther, “We cannot be or become perfect in the sense that we do not have any sin, the way they dream about perfection.”<sup>78</sup> In another statement Luther writes, “It is vain to long for such perfection in this life that we become wholly righteous, that we love God perfectly, and that we love our neighbor as we love ourselves.”<sup>79</sup>

Yet although thus quite uneasy with the term “perfection”, Luther is prepared to speak of Christian holiness and to distinguish two types of it. “In the first place, there is the holiness from and through ourselves.” The monastic orders and self-chosen spirituality fall into this category. This amounts to no more than the word or name ‘holiness’.<sup>80</sup> In the second place, however, there is a genuine holiness in the following sense: “You and I are holy; the church, the city, and the people are holy—not on the basis of their own holiness but on the basis of a holiness not their own, not by an active holiness, but by passive holiness. They are holy because they possess something that is divine and holy, namely, the calling of the ministry, the Gospel, Baptism, etc., on the basis of which they are holy.”<sup>81</sup> In another passage, speaking about “saintliness”, Luther again distinguishes between two kinds of it, but reverses their order. The second kind is now “saintliness of works,”<sup>82</sup> already familiar to us from Luther’s many caricatures. But the first kind of “saintliness” is worth a closer look. As we may readily recognize, here, too, the model has been obtained from the doctrine of justification. “. . . the Word . . . is saintliness itself. But this saintliness is imputed to those who have the Word. And a person is simply accounted saintly, not because of us or because of our works but because of the Word. Thus the whole person becomes righteous.”<sup>83</sup>

I would hesitate, however, to designate this as *the* doctrine of sanctification of Luther, since it is not the only definition which Luther has supplied. Luther makes use of another model as well in which some attention is paid to what has been the objective impact of grace on the Christian. Admittedly, the major emphasis continues to rest on the presence of sin. But this is not the only insight. Luther also observes, “For although we have become a new creature, nevertheless the remnants of sin always remain in us.”<sup>84</sup> Of course, the term “new creature” is ambiguous. Does it mean that a Christian is *accounted* a new creature or does it mean that a Christian is *in fact* a new creature, however incomplete? Several passages suggest that, at least at times, Luther is definitely thinking of an actual change in the believer. “A Christian is not yet perfect, but he is a Christian who has, that is, who begins to have, the righteousness of God.”<sup>85</sup> What Luther has in mind seems to be an authentic progress. “. . . we must keep striving for . . . [perfection], and moving and progressing toward it every

---

77. L W 7:44.

78. L W 21:129.

79. L W 1:197.

80. L W 24:170.

81. L W 26:25.

82. L W 5:214.

83. L W 5:213-214.

84. L W 30:228, cf. 30:43.

85. L W 17:224.



day. This happens when the spirit is master over the flesh, holding it in check, subduing and restraining it, in order not to give it room to act contrary to this teaching.”<sup>86</sup> Or, again, Luther writes, “It is characteristic of a Christian life to improve constantly and to become purer. When we come to faith through the preaching of the Gospel, we become pious and begin to be pure. But as long as we are still in the flesh, we can never become completely pure.”<sup>87</sup> That Luther speaks of this progress with great caution is clear enough. Sometimes he warns explicitly, “We make some progress; but sin, which wars in our members (Rom. 7:23) and is present everywhere, either corrupts or altogether obstructs this obedience.”<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, Luther appears to affirm that there is an essential difference between a believer and an unbeliever which in some concrete way goes beyond the doctrine of accounting; that is, man’s status has not only been changed (God accepts him, though he is still a sinner) but also his heart (he is in the process of being healed, hence is partially restored). There are clues which point in this direction. For example, Luther claims that “our condition in the kingdom of Christ is half sin and half holiness.”<sup>89</sup> Most importantly, Luther believes in the actual presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the believers.<sup>90</sup>

At the same time, the fact remains that Luther does not want to find a conceptual way by which to record the exact progress in sanctification. He has his own very serious theological reasons for this omission. Subjectively and existentially, the exact degree of sanctification reached simply cannot be known! Luther records this major insight in at least two versions: “True humility . . . never knows that it is humble, as I have said; for if it knew this, it would turn proud from contemplation of so fine a virtue.”<sup>91</sup> “False humility, on the other hand, never knows that it is proud; for if it knew this, it would soon grow humble from contemplation of that ugly vice.”<sup>92</sup>

What applies to the individual in regard to his own inquiry about his progress in sanctification, also applies in regard to the other “saints”. Luther reports, “God hides His saints under such masks and carnal matters in order that nothing may seem to be more abject than they. What, then, is the difference between David and Scipio or Julius Caesar? . . . But the difference is this, that David lives in the promise and commandment of God. Julius Caesar has neither God nor the devil. Indeed, he is a slave of Satan . . .”<sup>93</sup> Thus, according to Luther, although faith and justification can be

---

86. *L W 21:129*. Axel Gyllenkrok, *Rechtfertigung und Heiligung in der fruehen evangelischen Theologie Luthers* (Uppsala: A.B. Lundequistska Bokhandel, 1952), pp. 99-102, 111-113.

87. *L W 30:17*.

88. *L W 1:197*.

89. *L W 21:205* Reinhold Seeberg, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* (Basel: Benno Schwabe, 1953), IV,1:295 underscores the reality of change brought about by justification: “Von vornherein steht zu erwarten, dass Luther die Rechtfertigung nicht nur als judizielle Imputation sondern auch als reale Veraenderung des Suenders verstehen wird.” Similarly Karl Holl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, (Tuebingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1948), I:122.

90. Such references Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1953), p. 69, however, prefers to misread as merely changes of the justified person’s status, not condition, and rejects the views of Holl and Seeberg. Leonard Fendt, *Luthers Schule der Heiligung* (Leipzig: H.G. Wallmann, 1929), p. 10 supports a real though, of course, never complete, sanctification in the believer.

91. *L W 21:315*.

92. *L W 21:316*.

93. *L W 7:311*.



recognized, sanctification remains hidden. This effectively prevents pride from nurturing hypocrisy. Yet for those truly worried about their condition *vis-a-vis* God, Luther offers a paradoxically profound assurance. "Grace can never forsake him who despairs of himself."<sup>94</sup> Luther believes this insight to be true and repeats it in several versions. For example, "Then is God rightly worshiped when we completely disparage ourselves and ascribe all praise and glory and whatever is in us to Him."<sup>95</sup> "The one who is most depraved in his own eyes is the most handsome before God and, on the contrary, the one who sees himself as handsome is thoroughly ugly before God, because he lacks the light with which to see himself."<sup>96</sup> "Whoever does not believe the Word will not confess that God alone is righteous nor that he is only a sinner."<sup>97</sup>

This advice, of course, is intended only for the people who are in actual despair. It is not meant for the lazy sinner as an excuse for wrong doing. Because the wrong does not have to be done! Luther asserts that in justification "sin has been made weak";<sup>98</sup> temptation, therefore, can be resisted. "You cannot prevent the birds from flying over your head. But let them only fly and do not let them build nests in the hair of your head. Let them be thoughts and remain such; but do not let them become conclusions."<sup>99</sup> Again, while this is a sound warning not to plan how to sin successfully, it is not a construct which will allow us to detect the level of our sanctification: while aware of the sins which we have refused to commit, we do not know the amount of sins which we already have committed!

Thus Luther's doctrine of sanctification remains a useful theoretical construct, although it cannot be verified in the realm of actual experience. Most of the time Luther regarded any attempts at verification as destructive of authentic Christian piety and an exhibition of plain pharisaism. Yet such was not Luther's approach at all times. There were occasions when the "more" and "less" of the Holy Spirit's gift did intrigue Luther. "God has spent just as much on me as He has spent on the greatest saint. The only difference is that the saint may have grasped the treasure better and may have a stronger faith than I have."<sup>100</sup> At other times Luther noted that no "equal grace" had been given in the first place.<sup>101</sup>

At all times, however, Luther made use of the concept of courage to speak of sanctification in an open and objective way. Although humility could not be known without ceasing to be humble, courage could be recognized in oneself and in others without damaging it in the least! Of course, courage, too, did not originate from within the depth of one's personality, but was a gracious gift of God. ". . . He causes in us through the Spirit the courage or confidence to finish something we have begun and to which we otherwise would scarcely aspire in our timidity."<sup>102</sup> Elsewhere Luther elaborates, "Therefore it becomes quite obvious that He strikes down that fear

---

94. *L W* 51:43.

95. *L W* 10:233.

96. *L W* 10:239.

97. *L W* 12:340.

98. *L W* 4:243.

99. *L W* 6:133.

100. *L W* 30:43.

101. *L W* 30:124.

102. *L W* 18:378.

and makes the heart courageous, lest it doubt that God does care and that it has a kindly God . . . For when a man's heart has adopted such confidence that he believes God cares for him, that God is kindly disposed to him, that God will be a very faithful Guardian and companion in every need, then he no longer is a man who believes this but already a divine creature, since he now has a divine zeal and power in his heart. This fires his heart and makes it grow against every fear, against all the foes he faces, in short, against all creatures."<sup>103</sup> Similarly, the Holy Spirit also provides the necessary courage "to battle" against one's own "wisdom".<sup>104</sup> As may very well be expected, at this point Luther cannot resist a few autobiographical comments. "As for me, Martin Luther, unless God had closed for me the eyes of reason, I would long ago have stopped preaching and have despaired. Now a boldness, or certainty, comes to my aid."<sup>105</sup> "If I had not been extraordinarily strengthened by God, I, too, would long since have been worn out and discouraged by this stubbornness of the unrepentant world."<sup>106</sup> Other references are equally telling. If Ovid, the Roman poet, could attribute courage to drunkenness,<sup>107</sup> even "to such an extent that one man has the audacity to oppose himself to a hundred others," we should not be at all surprised "that spiritual, holy, and salutary drunkenness adds much more courage to the godly who swell with divine power . . ."<sup>108</sup> While appreciating the courage of all martyrs-saints,<sup>109</sup> Luther's special favourite is Agnes. "Thus when Agnes was being carried off to prison and torture, she said that she felt just as if she were being led to a dance. What, I ask, was the source of such great courage on the part of the maiden? She was not afraid. She did not tremble. No, she exulted as though she were being summoned to a most sumptuous feast. This was no Epicurean contempt of death; it was true wisdom and understanding, because of which she concluded that life was very close to her. Therefore she laughed at the devil and death and regarded them as a joke, because for her death had been swallowed up through life."<sup>110</sup>

The principle which emerges here is clear. When a believer encounters insurmountable difficulties, the miracle of grace occurs: ". . . then God's power is coupled and joined with human weakness; omnipotence is combined with nothingness and the utmost foolishness and finally brings a weak person to the point that he does things that are impossible and unbelievable."<sup>111</sup> In other words, because courage is so clearly an experienced gift, its presence does not encourage the individual to pride. A person knows that one did not make oneself courageous! At the same time, personal courage as it is experienced can be measured. At times only the individual who has been given courage is aware of its presence; but if the gift is especially large and the circumstances truly demanding, then one person's courage becomes visible to all. In this way the interior life which is nurtured by the Holy Spirit is not entirely

---

103. L W 20:14, cf. 15:112.

104. L W 12:330.

105. L W 17:173-174, cf. 17:31 and 46.

106. L W 2:20.

107. "Then a poor man musters up courage" *Ars amandi*, I,239.

108. L W 8:252.

109. L W 8:255, cf. 8:259.

110. L W 8:191.

111. L W 5:132, cf. 5:145.

hidden from the world. Yet in actual practice Luther still refuses to measure it. Moreover, Luther did not generally explore whether there is an ongoing continuity between separate acts of courage. It seems that Luther assumed such a continuity (note his description of the so-called *Wundermaenner* which God sends from time to time to rectify human affairs<sup>112</sup>) — and thereby joined the otherwise hidden progress in sanctification with the observable character development of the individual. If so, then sanctification, exhibited through the Holy Spirit's gift of one particular human virtue, would shine through other human virtues as well. Again, Luther's well nigh infinite fear of falling into work righteousness drove Luther to issue more warnings against sin than to count the blessings which he and others had received. Critics may think that Luther was too insecure to develop a clear doctrine of sanctification. Friends and admirers will appreciate Luther's wisdom in sketching this great doctrine with such remarkable tenuousness, in which, however, humility and courage emerge with some clarity.<sup>113</sup>

---

112. *L W* 3:261, 13:154-156.

113. Adolf Koeberle, *The Quest for Holiness* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1938), p. 109.