

**How is the distinction between justification and sanctification pivotal for Lutheran ethics?**

Christopher R. Gillespie  
01.07.2007

Theological Ethics

Prof. John Pless

## **Introduction**

What is the proper approach to Lutheran ethics? What distinguishes Lutheran ethics from pagan ethics or even the ethics of other Christian denominations? These are the questions Adolf Köberle seeks to answer with *The Quest for Holiness*. Köberle's focus is the challenge to the orthodox Lutheran understanding of justification and sanctification in the German church's struggles with the Reformed theologian Karl Barth during the 1920's and 30's. While Barth positively seeks to remove the secularizing of the Gospel; with his reform come influences of Reformed theology. Köberle seeks to present a consistent Biblical, historical, and systematic study of justification and sanctification in the Lutheran tradition. Ultimately, his investigation provides basis for ethics of a Lutheran understanding.

### **What is sin and what are sins?**

The structure Köberle presents challenges to the reader. He continually returns to previously discussed topics and refreshes them in the current context. He uses a cyclical pedagogy with smaller eddies and larger cycles of thought. While the internal structure repeats, he seeks to demonstrate in the larger cycles a number of systematic ideas as foundational for a Lutheran understanding of justification and sanctification. This groundwork is essential for the task of giving a Lutheran basis for ethics.

Köberle first presents man's "quest for holiness." He gives three basic attempts, that of the will, the emotions, and the mind. In all three attempts, man believes that sins can be overcome without God. Yet, man does not recognize that his sin is separation from God. His "quests" are fruitless. He lives in confidence and fearlessness, that is, of unbelief. The unbelief re-

fuses the justification of man given in Christ. Instead the unbeliever substitutes his own attempts to live a holy life and ultimately justify himself.

First, man uses the will to pursue holiness. Through determination, he believes unholiness can be overcome. Attempts might include moral discipline, humanistic ethics, and holiness cults. Man perceives the human will as something that can overcome the distance between he and God. (5) Under the Law, God disproves these notions. Man's persistent attempts to follow the Law of God ultimately lead him to either a terrified conscience (25-27) or accommodated failure. Man will be either in utter despair or will ignore his lack of complete obedience and perceive himself holy.

Secondly, man uses emotions to elevate the life to a perceived holier state. Forms of enthusiasm including modern Pentacostalism and ancient Gnosticism (29) rely not on God's action but on their own experience to bring holy reform. Mysticism does not wait patiently for God to act but seeks immediate union with God. (9) A gnostic dualism of spirit and flesh underlies this attempt where man separates world/flesh from spirit. (28-29) Both attempts refuse to believe God as creator. They ignore the first article of the Creed. (37) God hides behind masks (*larvae dei*) in his creation. Man does not find God by escaping from the world but precisely in the world.

Thirdly, man uses his intellect to elevate his perception of his holiness. "Where the Jew...seek salvation by a legalistic morality, the Greek...seek wisdom and by it reach God." (12) The reason of man is placed over the revelation of God. "We are accustomed to admit that God is more powerful than we but not that He is wiser." (38) Even Christian theologians (Aquinas) have tried to synergize reason and revelation. (13-14) Reason wants to reach God within its own realm and on its own terms. (44)

All these attempts fail to recognize that as fallen creature, man does not possess the holiness of God. All human attempts to achieve reconciliation with God are useless. (20-24) The godlessness of the will that seeks its own way is not a harmless defect, but a real and lethal enmity towards God. (25) The crucifixion of Jesus is God's judgment on our attempts at self-salvation. "That in spiritual and divine matters, the mind, heart, and will of the unborn human being can in absolutely no way, on the basis of its own natural powers, understand, believe, accept, consider, will, begin, accomplish, do, effect, or cooperate. Instead, it is completely dead to the good- completely corrupted." (Formula of Concord, SD II-7)

Another distinction must be made before approaching the Biblical doctrine of justification and sanctification, that is, of sin and sins. Sin is the separation of God in unbelief. Sins are the repercussions of this unbelief. The temptation to particular sins is not the same as unbelief although they may lead to unbelief. Even if all perceived sinful deeds are avoided, man as sinner still remains. Appropriate doctrinal response requires a proper distinction between sin and sins. "Whoever wishes to provide a doctrine of justification must possess a doctrine of sin...whoever wishes to provide a doctrine of sanctification must also furnish a doctrine of sins." (207) We must not confuse the sin and sins and so confuse justification and sanctification.

### **What is justification?**

With a proper understanding of sin and man's attempts to overcome it, he knows he desperately needs justifying or is condemned to hell. Christ justifies man before the Father by His death and resurrection. On Christ's behalf, God declares the Christian righteous. Christ justifies not based on our merit, wisdom, virtue, disposition, or heart. Man does not find the certainty

of the forgiveness of justification in his efforts but in the work of Christ.

(60)

Man receives this justification fully and completely in his baptism. Just as Christ was crucified and rose once and for all, baptism carries a similar character of being once and for all. (62-65) Jesus also bestows upon us the forgiveness of sins as a free gift in the Lord's Supper. By the lack of human merit and the gift of sacramental life, justification in Lutheranism avoids any notions of synergy between man and God or merit or worthiness being required before grace is received. Rather forgiveness has been won for all in Christ. (73-76)

The believer receives his justification by faith. This faith does not merit justification; it is not the work of man. The believer receives faith externally. Faith comes not through will, through emotion, or by intellect. Faith comes by God's grace. (77) This faith believes with certainty that Christ died for sins and that his forgiveness is given through sacraments. Faith assents and trusts in the promises of the Gospel. (76) "In the *sola fide* our personality is attached to God in a relation of utter dependence. Man no longer tries to bind God to his own self-consciousness; he knows himself wholly bound by God and so faith brings humility with it." (82) Through justification, God frees man from himself, from self-made righteousness, and from the indictment of Satan. (83) The believer is free in faith to serve God and serve his neighbor.

### **What is sanctification?**

The content of sanctification is the same content of Scripture which shows us our sin and need for justification, the Law. For the new justified man the Law no longer is condemnatory. The death and resurrection of Christ

bring into existence a new reality. "The curse of the Law has been overcome, peace is once again established with God and the power of God, the living source of a new morality has been made free for the members of the Body of Christ." (86) Where the old man is powerless to keep the Law, the new man is empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Law does not have the power to sanctify. (238) The Holy Spirit acts in unison with the death and resurrection of Jesus, the justifying act. (88) This saving faith receives new life given by the Holy Spirit. (90)

This work of the Holy Spirit is a contradiction to our reason (114-115) The Holy Spirit destroys confidence in our own works. (116) Now the Law is no longer compulsory. The Holy Spirit instead bestows a glad spirit to do God's will. (120) The Spirit binds the constraint of the Father's will to the freedom to do His will. (121) We surrender our human wisdom to the knowledge of the glory of God. This knowledge does not come through nature or mysticism but through the Spirit working by His Word. (128-131) By this wisdom, the redeemed demonstrate in weakness the power of rebirth and life found in justification. The new man lives and breathes his justification and sanctification. (135)

### **What is the relationship of justification and sanctification?**

Saving faith receives both justification and sanctification. (90) Where there is forgiveness of sins, there is the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Sanctification is an exclusive act of God just as justification. (95) Distinguishing between justification and sanctification is more difficult than distinguishing Law and Gospel. (245) Indeed the two while different should never be separated. (96)

First, God alone is the author and perfecter of our faith. The act of redemption is passively received in faith. Second, the Holy Spirit replaced the freedom to do evil that proceeded conversion with the freedom to do good. The word of forgiveness produces faith and a new life. It does not simply aid, support or strengthen the old will but creates a new will. (148) Both the justification and the Christian life are by grace through faith in Christ alone. (150)

Unlike justification which is completed once and for all, sanctification is never complete this side of heaven. If sanctification were completed in advance of the resurrection of the dead and our communion with God in heaven, justification would be undermined. (97-98) "When God accepts a man and endows him with the Spirit He does not destroy the evil within him in an instant, but he is like a dead twig that is grafted into a living tree, to grow and quicken to the increasing mastery of evil." (152) Sin remains with us until our death and the resurrection of the dead. We live in conflict between the flesh and Spirit, death and life, old and new man. Man is *simul justus et peccator*. The old man obeys out of compulsion; the new man out of liberty. (154)

"Because sanctification is the work of God in the justified sinner; because it is not the creative cause but the consequence of grace it can neither bestow nor maintain grace in the sinner. What is always first given in and with faith cannot produce faith." "Faith can preserve the Christian in sanctification, but sanctification cannot preserve him in faith." (236) "Without the continual return to justification, sanctification falls into Pharisaism and the wildest exaggeration.... When, however, we hold fast to the condemning and pardoning word of forgiveness, sanctification receives its true modesty and true vitality." (250)

Our justification and sanctification work in unison to remake us into the *imago Dei*, the image of God. Only by the atoning work of Christ and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit do we regain this image lost at the fall. (156) This image of God renewed within us does not compel us to act or provide a moral sense but is the mark of being given the gift of Christ. The Father marked us as His children. The motive that impels us to lead holy lives is rendering to God the gifts which are God's. (158) "So in the sanctification of one who has been justified by faith as it is worked out in thankfulness and through the power of the example of Christ. The truth of the Kingdom of God comes indeed of itself, without our efforts, again finds its realization." (162)

### **What is the Lutheran basis for ethics?**

The Lutheran basis for ethics is the sanctified life of the believer as demonstrated by Köberle. It requires the justification received at the cross of Christ and the holy life given by the Spirit. Spirit-given freedom is the answer both to legalism and relativism with ethics. (121) The old man fears the wrath of God; being lost through disobedience. The new man lives in gratitude and not through fear or compulsion. Yet fear and obedience drives our on-going warfare with sin. (168) The Christian life is a paradox of both gift and responsibility. (170)

Lutheran ethics are never merely descriptive. "The brother of the Law is compulsion, the sister of freedom is gladness. When the Spirit is the teacher He leads on to a cheerful spirit." (123) Unlike the American legal system which provides only a guide of what *not* to do, the Holy Spirit speaks of what we have been given to do, that which is good. (124) The Biblical position

will always be unacceptable to "rationalist-ethical thinking." (144) Rather, the Spirit illuminates our ethical understanding through two means.

First, God has given both the right and strength to pray. Through prayer which resides in God's Word, the Spirit sanctifies through His Word. Scripture and prayer are united; *oratio* arises out of the *meditatio* of Scripture. (177) The justified man has been given the power to pray. The Spirit comes in faith and provides the content of the prayer, His Word.

Second, the Spirit works within the bodily existence of the new man. There is no disconnect between flesh and spirit. The new man is watchful of his words, thought, and deeds. (188-9) The Christian existence is not existential-spiritualism but is body and Spirit. This bodily discipline does not withdraw from the world (monasticism) but lives in vocation in the world with love for the neighbor.

"Each one shall be the other's daily bread" says Luther. (196) The Christian lives within the world with love for neighbor. Justification brings this new man into being. The Spirit works sanctification to be the mask of God for neighbor. By the gift of the Spirit we resist the attacks of Satan in the world and engage in acts of mercy for neighbor. (198-201)

### **Bibliography**

Köberle, Adolf. *The Quest for Holiness: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Investigation*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1936.

Pless, John T. *READER'S GUIDE: A Quest for Holiness*, 2006.