

The Doctrine of Sanctification

IN order to properly understand the doctrine of sanctification, we must know who we are as Christians and what actually transpired when we placed our faith in Christ and His saving Gospel. The Scriptures testify that the moment we receive the grace of God in Christ (normally through the waters of baptism), we are born again. This birth is not a metaphor, but indeed a real birth. It is a birth not of the flesh, but of the Spirit (John 3:1-6). We are literally born of God, and are indeed sons of God (1 John 3:1-3). We are ‘partakers of the Divine Nature’ (2 Peter 1:4). We are no longer in Adam, but are in Christ (1 Cor 15:22). We are no longer under the Law, but are under Grace (Rom 6:15). We are no longer dead in trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1), but are alive unto God (Rom 6:11). As new creatures (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15,16), we ‘delight in the Law of God after the inward man’ (Rom 7:22). Luther writes:

‘Whoever believes in Christ, believes that He was born for us, died, was buried and raised again from the dead, he is regenerated, or born anew. He is a new man, for now he has thoughts which no Papist or Turk ever had... If you continue in this faith, the Holy Ghost is there and baptises you, strengthens and increases your faith, puts a new understanding into your heart, and awakens in you holy and new thoughts and affections, so that you begin to love God and refrain from all wicked actions, and do from your heart what God would have you do, and love your neighbour, and shun anger, hatred, and envy.’ (SL VII:1862)

While we are in truth new creatures in Christ, we continue to experience the old man in Adam. And this old man in Adam is thoroughly corrupt. He is not subject to the Law of God, neither indeed can be (Rom 8:7). He continually opposes and struggles against the Spirit (Gal 5:17). Sanctification therefore occurs in that the new man combats the flesh (old man) with its affections and lusts (Gal 5:24), resists its evil desires, prevents its wicked designs, and performs that which is pleasing to God. The Christian is to put off the old man, and put on the new man, ‘which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness’ (Eph 4:24; Col 3:10). Sanctification is effected not by reforming the flesh (Rom 8:13; Gal 5:24), but by crucifying and mortifying it [putting it to death] (Matt 18:8,9). Luther writes:

...all the saints struggle against their sinful flesh and are sinners as long as they live in the flesh, which warreth against the spirit; therefore at one and the same time they serve God according to the spirit and sin according to the flesh. (SL XV:1551ff)

With regard to the struggle of the spirit against the flesh, the Christian must note the following:

- a) The constant struggle between the two natures is a proof that he is living in a state of grace (Rom 7:22-25);
- b) Since the old man in the believer always remains corrupt, so that according to the flesh Christians are no better than unbelievers, the believer must not be surprised by the depth of the wickedness that still resides in him (Rom 7:18; 1 Thess 4:3-7);
- c) While the struggle against the flesh is both difficult and painful, the Christian must recognise that the good fight of faith must go on to the end (1 Tim 6:12; 2 Tim 4:7);
- d) Scripture assures the believers that in their struggle against the flesh they will obtain the victory provided they continue to cling to God’s Word (John 15:7,8; Eph 6:17). Luther writes:

‘This life is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness; not health, but healing; not being, but becoming; not rest, but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it; the process is not yet finished, but it is going on; this is not the end, but it is the road; all does not gleam with glory, but all is being purified.’ (Holman Translation, Vol III, p 31.)

Perhaps the best analogy I can give of this reality is that of a dirty light bulb. The glass or bulb itself would be like our old man in Adam or our flesh. It is, from birth, completely covered with filth. No matter what efforts a person makes to cleanse it, the filth ever remains. In fact, the filth belongs to the very nature of the glass. If a person dies in this darkened condition, he is forever lost. However, when a person receives the Gospel of Christ, (usually via the waters of baptism), his light is ignited, and he has life. This light is the new man in Christ. As he draws upon the Word of God, as upon a power source, this light begins to grow in brilliancy, though the light itself never changes its nature. It was light to begin with and continues to be light. But it does grow brighter. And the manifestation of this light through the dirty bulb begins to be evidenced to others in a progressive way. In fact, it may look to others as though the bulb is not as filthy as it once was, but this is only an appearance. In truth, the nature of the bulb remains corrupt, while the nature of the light remains righteous. As Jesus said, ‘*Either make the tree good and his fruit good, or else make the tree corrupt and its fruit corrupt*’ (Matt 12:33). ‘*A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, and neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit*’ (Matt 7:18). Finally, at death, the filthy bulb breaks up and falls away, while the light (which was there all along throughout the Christian’s life) continues to shine for all eternity.

As mentioned above, the means by which the old man is mortified and the new man is strengthened is the Word of God, both the Law and the Gospel. The Law must be diligently used by the believer to show the exceeding sinfulness of sin and the works that are truly pleasing to God (1 Cor 6:1-10). Thus the believer uses the Law as a mirror that ‘he may be led to the knowledge of his sins’; as a curb ‘to restrain his intractable carnal heart as though

by certain bars'; and as a fixed rule 'according to which he regulates and directs his whole life'. However, the power to accomplish sanctification and to do good works comes alone from the Gospel (Rom 12:1; 1 John 4:10,11). It is the Gospel which inscribes the Law in the heart and enables the believer to keep it (Jer 31:31 ff). The Gospel alone produces spiritually good works, which flow from true faith in Christ and true love to God.

Thus, true sanctification occurs when a believer by daily repentance beseeches God to forgive his sins for Christ's sake and then, in faith and trust in the grace of God, renews his fight against sin and his consecration to holiness. And in this fight he looks to Christ, as revealed in His Holy Word, for strength and wisdom. Christ thus becomes the true Captain of the Host, by which every good work is accomplished (Rom 15:18). True sanctification requires continual study of the Law for the purpose of obtaining an ever greater knowledge of sin and of God's demands, continual meditation on the Gospel for an ever greater assurance of forgiveness, and continual mindfulness of the goal which the pilgrim of Christ must attain on his road to heaven, his real home. The life of true sanctification is a life in Christ, unto God, by the power of the Holy Spirit, in view of the hope of eternal glory.

One last note is that in this battle between the flesh and the spirit, Christ further subdues the flesh by means of the cross. That is, He weakens and humbles the flesh through tribulations and trials. Luther writes:

A Christian, just because he is a Christian, is subjected to the dear cross, so that he must suffer at the hands of men and of the devil, who plagues and terrifies him with tribulations, persecution, poverty, and illness and inwardly, in his heart, with his poisonous darts. The cross is the Christians' sign and watchword in their holy, precious, noble, and blessed calling, which is taking them to heaven. To such a calling we must render full due and accept as good whatever it brings. (SL XII:544f.)

Such trials are not intended by God to the Christian's hurt, but to his spiritual edification. As the flesh is subdued, the new man in Christ comes forward to bring forth fruit to the glory of God. Luther again writes:

Here [1 Peter 1:7] the Apostle shows clearly the fruit and benefit of such trials as are inflicted on believers both by tyrants and by sects. These trials, he says, tend to prove your faith and cause it to be found more precious than perishable gold that is proved by fire. For just as the fire does not hurt the gold, does not consume it nor diminish it, but is of benefit to it, for it purges it of all dross, so that it becomes pure and sterling, so, too, the fire and heat of persecution and all sorts of temptations indeed inflict pain and hurt the old man exceedingly, so that those who are tried in them become sad and at times impatient, but their faith is thereby purified and becomes refined like sterling gold or silver... If the devil had not all these years so vehemently attacked us with both force and cunning, we would never have reached this certitude of doctrine, nor would the article of Christian justification and the doctrine of faith have been brought to light with such clarity. (SL IX:1131)

In this article we have seen that the doctrine of sanctification has to do with Christian good works. These good works are those works which are in perfect accord with the will of God as prescribed by the Law of God. Only a Christian can produce such works. They are genuine fruits of the new man in Christ. They are brought forth as the Christian, by faith, feeds upon the Word of God, specifically the Gospel of Christ. The Gospel reveals the love of God to man, and the Christian in turn loves God and his neighbour. Love begets love. '*We love because He first loved us*' (1 John 4:19). Good works are simply manifestations of such love. The Christian cross also facilitates the process of sanctification. Trials and tribulations work to weaken and subdue the old man in Adam who wars against the new man in Christ. '*Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day*' (2 Cor 4:16). As the Christian continues in God's Word and patiently bears his cross, he is certain of bringing forth everlasting fruit to the glory of God.

S Wood.