

Sanctification and Charitable Works in Lutheran Theology

By Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison



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Mercy Forever

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PREFACE

How dare he? Of course, we're accustomed to hearing Mathew C. Harrison of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod delineate for us our Christian opportunities to live out our faith, active in love. It's no surprise to hear him describe our good works as tangible, merciful service to our neighbors — *diakonia*. But Harrison dares here to offer a stinging appraisal of the common ways many modern people have interpreted human care, dares to offer a refreshing contemporary proposal, and dares further to construct his argument straight from the heart of orthodox Lutheran theology.

After sketching out the Schleiermacherian slag of privatized spirituality, which continues to muddy-up our theological parlance and practice, Harrison directs us instead to the biblical concept of *diakonia*, which, in his conviction, is expressed best in its ecclesial and communal manifestations within the body of Christ. To this he is riveted, to use his verb. He tells us why. Since sin is much more than an intermittent affliction, much more than our occasional peccadilloes, much graver than acting-out on our "issues," it needs a correspondingly serious response. I look forward to what this prolific writer may have to say, in future works, about the corporate skein of structural sin. He has so uncannily detailed corporate sanctification.

Veined in *Sanctification and Charitable Works in Lutheran Theology* is a pulsating refutation of the feel-good moralism (*Gefühlsglaube*) we see pervading most Protestant approaches to societal betterment. Eviscerated of their spiritual content, these strategies have, in the main, errantly sold out to secular sociology and psychology. While these tools may inform our ministry, they aren't its replacement. In response, this author radically calls us to a serious approach to sanctification that is anchored in incarnational and sacramental theology. Though our culture is enamored with a personalized and sentimentalized faith, this

proposal, with moxie, begins and ends with an *extra nos* approach; outside of our sin-infiltrated images, guises and disguises, God comes to us.

There is no ranting and raving here. Rather, Harrison moves forward with surefooted confidence in the sacred traditions deposited in Scripture and expositied in the Lutheran Confessions. Frankly, he puts the church back in its place! It begins at the grassroots, with those whom the Spirit has gathered and gifted, the holy little flock; it begins with prayerful women and men, and with clergymen of holy office, all of whom are called “through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth”; they are enlisted to be a people of good works and good words (2 THESS. 2:13-17). Of course, we know that “sanctification” is a very biblical word, but Harrison dares to suggest that it is encountered most fully in that place called the church; thus, he interprets Christian acts of compassion as communally emplaced. In fact he asserts, against the grain, that “individualism has really hampered us missiologically”. Instead of the “me-and-my personal Jesus” syndrome, Harrison redirects us to God’s mercy and glory, which, in worship, are located primarily in the name of Jesus. Forgiveness flows in the threefold name, and is offered through the Gospel and Sacraments when the church confesses Christ concretely — to cite Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s key phrase.

But don’t be fooled or deluded into misreading Harrison here. He cannot be co-opted to support a fortress mentality, or any ideas of the church cloistered safely behind the crenellated walls of some sort of stained-glass ghetto. This is no sacerdotalized, liturgical rigidity. Three and a half decades ago, one LCMS systematic theologian observed how the centrifugal mission of Christian action begins best in God’s holy things:

It is not an accident that eucharistic renewal and the renewal of the church’s awareness of her servant role in the world outside the walls of her buildings have always

tended to go hand in hand, and that liturgy and a sense of awareness of the Christian responsibility for society have so often accompanied one another.”¹

This also is Matthew Harrison’s daring assertion. The same sort of sacramental transformations that happen to bread and wine, water, and ordinary, proclaimed words, happen also to God’s people. Christ Jesus inhabits ordinariness, tangibly.

I deeply appreciate Harrison’s predilection toward an incarnational reading of human care work (**JOHN 1:14**). These days, humanity around the globe is tormented by spiritual rootlessness. We are besieged by cruel prosperity theologies promising what they can’t deliver. All manner of gruesome suffering is intensified for those who don’t belong, can’t fit, won’t ever succeed. Yet, as a pastor, I’ve found that people in pain can survive, and even thrive, when they know they belong. Every individual was created to be “in” something. So, not only are we put in our place with Harrison’s proposal, but using St. Paul in **ROMANS 6**, we’re reminded that we belong to something that goes beyond time: “the myriad individual baptisms across time and space are baptisms into the one Christ”. Once in our “place,” we are liberated from the twin tyrannies of individualism and nowism. God roots us in a timeless church through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, and weaves our roots into relationships of love with our sisters and brothers through the Sacrament of the Holy Supper. The holy things are for us, the holy people. Christ Jesus transforms ordinariness. To be holy means to be *in* Christ and have Christ *in* you. According to blessed Martin Luther, to be “in” means much more than we might first suspect.² With eucharistic overtones, the reformer teaches: “‘in’ is equivalent to ‘above,’ ‘beyond,’

¹ Piepkorn, Arthur Carl. “The One Eucharist for the One World.” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 43:2 (1972), 106.

² Harrison’s ecclesiological-driven sanctification is analogous, in its expansivist connotations, to Luther’s Christologically-driven spirituality.

‘beneath,’ ‘through and through,’ and ‘everywhere.’³ Only when we are rooted in the truly Transcendent — Him who goes beyond all time and stands behind all space — can we dare truly to care about people locally, who are hurting because of demonic inhumanity perpetrated in time and space. So as “a people born and sustained of mercy” we extend mercy to the disgraced, the dishonored, the disconnected, the disheveled, the dispossessed, the discriminated against and the just plain “dissed.”

Mercy from the Lord’s table, from the Lord’s font, and from the Lord’s preacher (*Deus locutus*) actually creates clean hearts in the Lord’s people. They are thusly sanctified. They are the holy church throughout the world, which acknowledges God to be the ultimate in goodness and mercy. And the Father’s love overflows through the church’s words and works in Jesus’ name, filling every space and place, like the Spirit hovering, permeating every nook and cranny of every neighborhood, every office suite and every back alley, promising redemption to every corner of creation.

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Chicago, IL

April 9, 2006

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1945)

Teacher and Martyr

³ Luther, Martin. “Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper.” *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, vol. 37. Robert H. Fischer, trans. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1961), 230.

SANCTIFICATION AND CHARITABLE WORKS IN LUTHERAN THEOLOGY

I must confess. I have never had the slightest interest in greatly, or even marginally, expanding my understanding of “sanctification” as a locus of Lutheran theology. Surely such absence of desire is the strongest indication of the lack of the presence of the topic of this series of lectures within my own life. It’s sort of the inverse of Walther’s famous answer to the worried inquirer who frets, “I believe I’ve committed the sin against the Holy Ghost and that I shall be eternally damned, without any hope!” Walther suggests the reply, “Well, it’s obvious you haven’t committed the sin against the Holy Ghost, because if you had, you wouldn’t be worried that you might have done so!” The implication for Harrison: “You don’t care about sanctification because you don’t in fact possess the Holy Ghost!”

SCHLEIERMACHER ON SANCTIFICATION:

ME AND JESUS. AND WE’RE GETTING BETTER EVERY DAY!

But alas, such a statement does trouble me. Perhaps there is hope yet ... or maybe not. I for one would have been most happy if the locus of “sanctification” in Lutheran dogmatics had never been sanctified (sanctioned). “Sanctification” is but a logically consequent but temporally coterminous part of the doctrine of justification. Early Lutheran dogmatics considered justification, regeneration, renewal, and sanctification all within the locus of justification (e.g. Melancthon’s *Loci Praecipui*; Chemnitz’s *Loci Theologici*). After justification came the locus on good works. But it happened sometime between Quenstedt’s *Systema* (1690) (where the locus *De Bonis Operibus* follows *De Fide Justificante* — at least in the “didactic” or last section of the great work), and Buddeus’s *Institutiones* (1724), where *De Justificatione* is followed by *De Sanctificatione seu Renovatione*. Even Hollaz’s *Examen*

(1707), with its burgeoning interest in the *ordo salutis* simply follows the locus on justification with that on “good works.” Thus Schleiermacher is running in an already very well-worn, century-old track when he sets aside pages for the locus of “sanctification” in *The Christian Faith*. Late orthodoxy had a penchant toward psychologization of the *ordo salutis*, which was intricately expanded in the period of pietism. This led to a temporal disintegration of what are really coterminous realities in the life of the believer. Justification became a “rear-view mirror” doctrine (Scaer) of the Christian life. With this also came the drift toward understanding sanctification in purely individualistic and especially psychological terms (via pietism and rationalism). And thus we have the definition of sanctification in Schleiermacher:

In living fellowship with Christ the natural powers of the regenerate are put at His disposal, whereby there is produced a life akin to His perfection and blessedness; and this is the state of Sanctification.¹

Now *that’s* the definition of sanctification I grew up with! Justification a mere speck and fading in the rear-view mirror: purely individual! Nicely appreciative of my “natural” capabilities! Of course, with a “living” fellowship with Jesus (we wouldn’t want a “dead” fellowship, for goodness sake!). More like Jesus every day! Magnanimously putting myself and my natural powers at Jesus’ “disposal.” Have you “surrendered” yourself to Jesus? That’s a long way from Melancthon and the old dogmatics locus of “good works” following justification, which led them to think of the Ten Commandments in the context of vocation. “Me and

¹ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 505. See also Werner Elert, *Der Christliche Glaube* (Hamburg: Furche-Verlage, 1956), 486–87. “An diesem Punkt ist die orthodoxe Dogmatik für den damals anhebenden Pietismus, anstatt sein theologisches Gewissen zu sein, zum theologischen Ruhekitzen geworden. Das Leben des Wiedergeborenen ist hier von der Rechtfertigung so weit getrennt, hauptsächlich durch allerlei psychologische Zwischenüberlegungen, dass es nur noch einer geringen Akzentverschiebung bedurfte, um das cooperari das Wiedergeborenen zur Hauptsache zu machen. Und am Ende steht die rationalistische Dogmatik, die dann das Verhältnis von Rechtfertigung und Heiligung vollends auf den Kopf stellt. ‘Das Streben nach Heiligkeit’ heisst es bei Wesegscheider, ‘ist das sicherste Fundament des wahren Glaubens.’”

Jesus.” “Jesus and me.” Maybe, just maybe — with enough time — I’ll find out Jesus is me! Hear Schleiermacher:

Sanctification, then, being understood to be progressive — so that the content of time-experience becomes from the turning-point of regeneration ever further removed from what preceded that crisis, and ever approximates more to pure harmony with the impulse issuing from Christ and therefore to indistinguishability from Christ Himself.²

Justification happened to me a long time ago. I’m making progress.

In fact, I’m Jesus! Schleiermacher is so edifying; let me quote him again:

[S]in cannot be perfectly blotted out, but remains always something in process of disappearance. In so far as it has not yet disappeared, it may [sic!] make itself visible, and acts will occur within the state of sanctification similar [sic!] to those common before regeneration, where what emerges is the power of the sinful common life, whereas the traces of preparatory grace lie deeply hidden.

Even if these intermittent evidences [sic!] of the continued presence of sin make particular instants, as compared with others, seem [sic!] relapses, none the less a settled consciousness remains that the longer the series of such fluctuations [sic!] is observed, the greater is the advance seen to be on the whole. ... So that in the powers put at Christ’s disposal [note who is doing the verbs!] sin can never win fresh ground.³

And since with Schleiermacher, too, all theology is Christology, we should not be surprised to find his definition of sanctification rooted in his view of Christ:

² Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 506.

³ *Ibid.*, 508–9.

If now ... we consider how this condition approximates to likeness to Christ, there has above been drawn a boundary line which it is not given to us to overstep. From the beginning of His incarnation onwards Christ developed in every way naturally yet constantly and uninterruptedly in organic union with the indwelling principle of His life, and in its service. ... [R]egeneration may be regarded as the divine act of union with human nature and sanctification as the state constituted by that union.⁴

Translation: You wanna be holy like Jesus? Develop in every way naturally yet constantly and uninterruptedly in organic union with the indwelling principle of your Christian life, Jesus.

We might respond to Schleiermacher with an Augustine-esque line: Friedrich, you have not yet considered how light a matter sin is for your *Tauf Patten*, pietism and rationalism! We see here, as we would expect, no serious dogma of incarnation. No requisite serious dogma of sin. There is here no serious sacramentology. There is here no trace of Luther's and Paul's inexorable dialectic of sin and grace, law and gospel, total condemnation under law, and total forgiveness under grace. There is no dogma of the church. Sanctification is an individual — no, individualistic — matter. It's all measurable approximation — the sure indicator that sanctification has fallen completely away from justification, the proper context of its locus. I'd prefer the medieval dogmatic paradigm of the *gratia infusa*, so similar in many respects to Schleiermacher here. At least there was a place for a crucifix in that religion, even if inconsistently so.

SANCTIFICATION AS A CORPORATE, ECCLESIAL REALITY

Of the many lines we might pursue here, I wish to consider directly only one (though other concerns will arise). That is,

⁴ Ibid., 509.

sanctification as a corporate reality in the church's life, in contradistinction from a doctrine of sanctification drawn merely along individualistic lines. This view of sanctification is what rivets my attention these days as I ponder and practice *diakonia* at the level of the national church. Theodosius Harnack complained that “*diakonia* was not of interest as a constituent part of ecclesiology, but was seen only as an expression of Christian groups and societies alongside the church.”⁵ That precisely describes the theological/practical reality I see daily expressed in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and all her related “social ministry” organizations. All this is but a perfect reflection of the fact that dogmatics in our circles relegates all matters of sanctification to the individual. And the locus on sanctification as traditionally explicated in Lutheranism deals only with the individual (e.g., Pieper). Thus, among us there is simply no dogmatic exposition — or biblical exposition — of the reality of the holiness of the church as it lives out in this life its justified, christological, and sacramental reality, particularly as it relates to *diakonia*. The church's life of mercy, then, precisely as a communal, corporate life of mercy, has become an *adiaphoron*. I am asserting that “sanctification” is above all a communal, corporate reality. Individual holiness flows from communal realities. I am asserting that in the words “Sanctification and the Church's Charitable Works,” “sanctification” is corporate. After all, they are the church's charitable works! And I will suggest that these facts best reflect the New Testament (and Luther), which demands *diakonia* as a “constituent element of ecclesiology.”

THE NEW TESTAMENT

In what follows I shall begin (and only begin) to trace the New Testament evidence for a corporate understanding of sanctification. To do so I shall, in part, climb on the back of Sasse's great Erlangen colleague Ott Procksch, who wrote the entry for the word *hagiazō*

⁵ See Carter Lindberg, “Luther's Concept of Offering,” in *Dialogue* 35/4 (1996): 252.

and its cognates for Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*.⁶ The entry has little concern for the communal reality of holiness in the New Testament, but the article nonetheless does offer much furtive material when considered from this perspective.

THE COMMUNALITY OF THE TRIUNE GOD, FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT

It is no unique or profound discovery that according to the New Testament the church's reality is communal and corporate. Here we wish to pursue this New Testament teaching particularly in view of holiness, or "sanctification." The communality of the church is a reflection of God. But this is more than mere metaphor, in the same way that "body of Christ" is no mere metaphor to describe the church. From the Trinitarian trisagion of **ISAIAH 6** to its repetition in **REV. 4:8**, the Bible teaches the corporate, communal nature of the blessed and Holy Trinity. Jesus calls the Father "Holy Father" (**JOHN 17:11**). "The one who has called you is holy," says Peter (**1 PETER 1:15F**). The Lord's Prayer calls upon the church to sanctify God's "name." The name can be none other than that one "name" of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (**MATT. 28:19**). This communality, based upon the essential unity of Father and Son, is reflected starkly in John's gospel and its use of Old Testament themes, for instance.

Yahweh had shown Himself "holy" to His Old Testament people (**LEV. 10:3**). His holiness was communicated via His "glory" or holy presence for forgiveness, most strikingly seen in His very "Holy of Holies" or in the pillar of cloud by day, fire by night. Note what happened when Solomon brought the ark to the temple: "When the priest withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of Yahweh. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled his

⁶ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 1: 88ff.

temple” (1 KINGS 8:10). We see clearly in the rest of Solomon’s prayer at the completion of the first temple that though Yahweh fills the earth, and no temple can be built to contain Him, nevertheless Yahweh has promised to dwell *there* with His “Name” (1 KINGS 8:29), so that forgiveness may be found at that *place*. To borrow and adapt a famous political phrase from Tip O’Neill, “All forgiveness, according to the Bible, is local.” God’s glory, name, and holiness are inseparable and always located for forgiveness. Located glory and holiness without Name and forgiveness leave only a dangerous *deus nudas*. “The glory of Yahweh filled his temple” (1 KINGS 8:11). *Doxa* is the Septuagint rendering of the Hebrew word *kabod*. “The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us. We have seen his *doxa*, the *doxa* of the only begotten of the Father” (JOHN 1:14). Jesus is the New Testament Holy of Holies, and beyond His Palestinian days, the Holy of Holies remains His body and blood in Holy Communion (HEBREWS 10). “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (JOHN 2:20). Thus Jesus is called the “Holy One” (MARK 1:24; LUKE 1:35; 4:34; JOHN 6:69; 1 JOHN 2:20; REV. 3:7; ACTS 3:14; 4:27, 30). In Luke it is based upon His being begotten of the Holy Ghost (1:35), but John has given us the ultimate reason: Jesus is Yahweh.

The communality of Father and Son in the divine attribute of holiness could be pursued at length, as could the nature of the Spirit as “Holy Spirit.” But we will forego further investigation of this point. It is this essential communality which indeed makes the Spirit the very Holy Spirit. “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things ... ” (JOHN 14:26). The Holy Father sends the Holy Spirit in the name of the Holy One, Christ. The Athanasian Creed might have expressed it beautifully like this: “The Father is holy. The Son is holy. The Spirit is holy. And yet there are not three holies, but one holy.”

SANCTIFICATION: GOING IT ALONE?

It is clear that the holiness of the Blessed Holy Trinity is corporate and communal and essential. The old dogmatic adage *opera ad extra indivisa sunt* expresses this communal and essential unity. So what happens when this holiness is apprehended by the church *sola fide, sola gratia*? To be sure, each individual apprehends or lays hold of Christ and His righteousness and holiness for himself. But even here, I'm afraid our radically individualistic era has caused us to think of conversion and justification (and also sanctification) merely individualistically. Don't we think of conversion and evangelism today almost exclusively in terms of "personal witness"? Don't we think of them happening individual to individual? And if this "coming to Jesus" is viewed as normally occurring quite outside the confines of "church," does it surprise us that in the minds of many Lutherans "the church" is not essential to salvation? After all, the largest "Lutheran Church in America" is indeed the "ILC" or "Invisible Lutheran Church." For census data show us that the number of people who describe themselves as "Lutheran" is far larger than the membership of the Lutheran church bodies combined. Baptism and preaching are, however, corporate acts. Walther states somewhere in a thesis that "conversion happens ordinarily [*ordentlicherweise*] through the preaching of called ministers, but extraordinarily through the witness of laymen." Where in our church would anyone view conversion in such a communal way today? In view of Rome's success with Rites of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) — which requires no "conversion," faith, or commitment in its initial stages — it is clear (to me at least) that this individualism has really hampered us missiologically. But that is another matter.

Back to the New Testament. "Sanctification" is communal. "To the saints . . ." is the plural salutation of the apostolic epistles. Whether holiness is described as imputed (*extra nos*) or inchoate, its communal, corporate connections are striking. In **1 PETER** we read, "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions

of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’” (1 PETER 1:14FF). Communal aspects mark the Petrine paranesis throughout. “Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart. . . . you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (1 PETER 1–2).

Paul’s letters are filled with the corporate nature of sanctification. “Christ Jesus . . . to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 COR. 1:30). “Do you not know that *you* [plural] are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you [among *you* — plural!]? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and *you* [plural] are that temple” (1 COR. 3:16–17). The Corinthians are “holy” precisely as a unified body. The temple suffering destruction is not the individual here, but the church as a body, torn by disagreement or by individuals “going it alone.” Each Christian is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 CORINTHIANS 7), but only because the Holy Spirit dwells in His church. Sexual immorality defiles not merely the one engaged in such activity (1 COR. 6:18FF), but is a defilement of Christ’s body (1 COR. 6:15FF), the church.

THE COMMUNALITY OF PAULINE SACRAMENTOLOGY

Sacramental references throughout Paul’s letters are communal, particularly as they express aspects of holiness, both with respect to the reception of the gift and the ethical consequences of the same. “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish For no one ever hated

his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body” (EPH. 5:25-30). In ROMANS 6 Paul asserts that the myriad individual baptisms across time and space are baptisms into one Christ. His resurrection brings resurrection for all the baptized. The significance of Christ’s death and resurrection are described completely in communal terms. “For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God” (ROM. 6:10). In ROMANS 12 — really an extension of the baptismal theology of chapter 6 — where Paul urges the Roman Christians to present their bodies as a “living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God,” this prefaces directly the communal nature of such sacrifice “For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another” (ROM. 12:4-5). Similar language, of course, peppers 1 CORINTHIANS. Because the Lord’s body and blood produce “one body” (1 COR. 10:16-17), individual freedom has limits: whether to avoid outright idolatry or for the sake of the brother’s weak conscience. The instruction on the Corinthian problem regarding the Lord’s Supper offers Paul an extensive opportunity to defie the consequences for the community created by communion. I, for one, believe that 1 COR. 11:29 (“For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself”) is at the very least a reference to the sacramental body of the Lord, but very likely is double entendre: failing to recognize Christ’s sacramental body caused the Corinthians to despise the manifestation of Christ’s body, the church. This and Holy Baptism gave Paul the opportunity to denounce Corinthian individualism. “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (1 COR. 12:13). One Spirit via Baptism and Supper, into one body, bringing many and various gift “for the common good” (v. 7).

CHRISTOLOGY AND THE CORPORATE LIFE OF MERCY

At this point, let me make something perfectly clear. I do not wish in any way to deny or undervalue the importance of both imputed (justification) and inchoate (sanctification) righteousness in the life of the individual believer. But in our dogmatic tradition (particularly the recent tradition), “sanctification” has been viewed as a purely individualistic matter. Much as I am struggling for clarity in this, I would like to assert that there is a corporate life of sanctification, if you will. As a body, we the church have been justified and sanctified. And as such a body, the New Testament would have us live out this justification and sanctification as a body, precisely in the practice of churchly, corporate works of charity and mercy.

The church’s corporate life of mercy is first of all an extension of Christology. The corporate life of mercy of the church is driven primarily by Christology. Most significant is the fact that the very sending of the Son in mercy, through His incarnation, mandates the life of mercy of the church. Regardless of the referents of “the least of these my brethren” in **MATTHEW 25**, we see clearly that Christ expects charity of His followers. We see in the very life of Christ Himself a self-sacrificing love of the neighbor, be he believer or not. Saul’s persecution of the church was viewed by Christ as an attack upon Himself, His very body (“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”). Surely the work of mercy of the church is the very extension, the very expression today of Christ’s love demonstrated so readily during His days of humiliation on this earth. I do not wish to go so far as to call what Christians do today for the sick a “continuation of the healing ministry of Christ.” That terminology tends to obscure the radically unique nature of Christ’s three-year ministry as an unparalleled eschatological event. And the kingdom of God does not advance per se by care for the needy. The kingdom comes via the proclamation of the Gospel. Sanctification as good works, or much less the assistance of the

needy, and much less so the transformation of the world into a just society, cannot be the goal of the church's life. The goal of the church's life is simply in being what she has been declared and ever more made in Christ: a people born and sustained of mercy, and therefore a merciful people (1 JOHN 3:15FF).

I do assert that if we are faithful to our own Christology and ecclesiology, the sanctified life of the church must express itself in a corporate, communal life of mercy in the church. Dealing with “sanctification” merely as an individual phenomenon, and then leaving the church's life of mercy out of the locus of the church, has kept us from properly understanding, wrestling with, and defining theologically the church's diakonic life. It is simply not adequate to relegate Jesus' (and the New Testament's) continually demonstrated and proclaimed concern for physical well-being to the realm of the eschatological, such that it need be no concern of the church today.

Christ proclaimed His Gospel, and aided those in need. What does the church as His body continue to do in this world? Indeed, what does *Christ* continue to do in the world? I would love to take a close look at Acts 6, and at Paul's collections for the poor in Jerusalem, which shed great light on the nature of the church as a corporate and merciful body. But that task will have to be postponed so that we have time and space to learn something from the Reformer.

LUTHER ON THE SACRAMENT AND THE COMMUNAL NATURE OF THE CHURCH

In 1519 Luther produced the first longer presentation of his dogma of the Sacrament: *A Treatise Concerning the Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ and Concerning the Brotherhoods*. The sacrifice of the mass, a topic which would soon consume a great deal of his time and effort, is not discussed positively or negatively. What is significant about this treatise is

Luther's elaboration of Pauline themes regarding the nature of the church as the body of Christ as a result of the Sacrament. The Supper is a *synaxis* or *communio*, says Luther. To communicate is to take part in Christ and all His saints.⁷ "All the saints, therefore, are members of Christ and of the Church, which is a spiritual and eternal city of God, and whoever is taken into this city is said to be received into the community of saints, and to be incorporated into Christ's spiritual body and made a member of him."⁸ All the spiritual blessings of Christ and His saints are imparted in the Sacrament, says Luther, and so all the sufferings and sins of the one who partakes are imparted to Christ and the saints. "And thus love engenders love, and unites all." As Paul asserts in **1 CORINTHIANS 12**, because of this sacrament, "whether one member suffer, all members suffer with it ... even the smallest toe." Whoever does injury to the one who partakes of the Sacrament, does injury to Christ and all His saints. Likewise, whoever does him a kindness does it to Christ and His saints. "Whatsoever you have done to the least of My brethren, that you have done to Me" (**MATT. 25:40**). Luther proceeds to draw a clearer picture of the spiritual blessings of the Sacrament: "If anyone be in despair, if he be distressed by his sinful conscience ... or have any other burden ... let him go joyfully to the sacrament of the altar and lay down his grief in the midst of the congregation and seek help from the entire company of the spiritual body ... " The Christian goes to the Sacrament to receive the sign (the unfortunate legacy of Augustinian language!) that "I have on my side Christ's righteousness, life and sufferings, with all holy angels and all the blessed in heaven, and all pious men on earth."

This view of the Sacrament has ethical ramifications: "you must in turn also share the misfortunes of the congregation ... "⁹

⁷ *Luther's Works*, American Edition, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1957), 22:10.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

There your heart must go out in love and devotion and learn that this sacrament is a sacrament of love, and that love and service are given you and you again must render love and service to Christ and His needy ones. You must feel with sorrow all the dishonor done to Christ in His holy Word, all the misery of Christendom, all the unjust suffering of the innocent, with which the world is everywhere filled to overflowing: You must fight, work, pray and, if you cannot do more, have heartfelt sympathy. That is bearing in your turn the misfortune and adversity of Christ and His saints. ... He said "This is my body ..." As though he said: I am the head, I will first give myself for you, will make your suffering and misfortune Mine own and bear it for you, that you in your turn may do the same for Me and for one another, have all things in common in Me and with Me and let this sacrament be unto you a sure token of this all, that you may not forget Me, but daily call to mind and admonish one another by what I have done for you and still am doing, that you may be strengthened thereby and also bear with one another.¹⁰

All afflictions, Luther contends, are to be "laid down in the midst of the congregation." Christ's blessings and our misfortunes are "one bread and loaf." Christ and the church are "one flesh and bone." Just as the bread is "changed into his true natural body and wine into his true natural blood, so truly are we also drawn and changed into the spiritual body, that is, into the fellowship of Christ and all saints, and put by this sacrament in possession of all the virtues and mercies of Christ and His saints."¹¹

Luther laments the loss in his day of this meaning of the Sacrament:

¹⁰ Ibid., 14.

¹¹ Ibid., 19.

But in times past this sacrament was so properly used, and the people were taught to understand this fellowship so well, that they even gathered material food and goods in the church and there distributed them among those who were in need, as St. Paul writes. Of this we have a relic in the word “collect” which still remains in the mass, and means a general collection, just as a common fund is gathered to be given to the poor. That was the time when so many became martyrs and saints. There were few masses, but much strength and blessing resulted from the masses; Christians cared for one another, assisted one another, sympathized with one another, bore one another’s burden and affliction. This has all disappeared, and there remain only the many masses and the many who receive this sacrament without in the least understanding or practicing what it signifies.¹²

No, we must on our part make others’ evil our own, if we desire Christ and His saints to make our evil their own; then will the fellowship be complete and justice be done to the Sacrament. For the Sacrament has no blessing and significance unless love grows daily and so changes a man that he is made one with all others.¹³

CONCLUSION

Sanctification is the living out of the life of justification every day. The doctrine of God, Christology, ecclesiology, and sacramentology of the New Testament portray this life of holiness as corporate, communal, and churchly. Luther’s doctrine of the Supper in 1519 provides a powerful interpretation of the sacramental and communal nature of the church, and the church’s life of love and mercy for the needy. According to the New Testament, and according to Luther, sanctification as the life of the Christian individual is

¹² *ibid.*, 16–17.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 17.

only a part of the New Testament dogma of sanctification, and it is a distortion if its communal aspects are lost. The dogma of sanctification must embrace the corporate nature of the church as the body of Christ, and thus embrace, or rather be embraced by, ecclesiology. Just as there is a church because there is Christ, and just as she is one body, so also she has works of charity.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is troubling about the slogan, “Me and Jesus — and we’re getting better every day”? (*p.1ff*) (Hint: consider **ROMANS 7** and **Ps. 51:3.**)
2. What is the difference between corporate and individual sanctification? (*p.4-5*) Why is the distinction important?
3. Compare this distinction to the double entendre of **1 COR. 11:29**, suggested on page 10.
4. “*Opera ad extra indivisa sunt*” (*p.5*) translates roughly, “the works [of the Trinity] toward that which is outside it [all creation] are united, not separate.” If God’s works are seen as communal, what parallel should be seen in the works of His church? (*p.10*)
5. What are the implications of this communal view of the church, summarized in the conclusion? (*p.15*)

[illegible]

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