

Sanctification: Daily Death and Resurrection

A short reflection on the uniqueness of the Lutheran doctrine of Sanctification

You Can't Teach an Old Adam New Tricks

Imagine your uncle has a pit bull, a mean pit bull, and every time you visit things are in a desperate state of disrepair. The curtains are ripped off the wall, the couch cushions are shredded, food and filth cover the floor, and blood. That blood is the blood of your cousins and your aunt. They're all in the hospital because this pit bull attacked them. And your uncle also has wounds from this mad dog, a missing finger, gashes on his face, stitches in his leg. You know that if your uncle lives much longer with that dog that he'll die.

"This is insanity", you say to your uncle through the window, shouting over the dog's growl, "That dog's going to kill you." "Nonsense," he shouts back, "I've just got to work harder training him." Your uncle holds up the books that just came in the mail, *Forty Days of Dog Training Purpose, Your Best Pit Bull Now!, Become a Better Pit Bull*, books that will soon be eaten by this mad dog just like all the rest.

Anyone, observing this situation from the outside, can see the insanity. You can't train a dog like this. And yet this is how most Christians treat their old Adam, their sinful flesh. They are busy trying to train and reform the sinful flesh. Insanity. You can't teach the Old Adam new tricks. There is only one thing to do with our sinful flesh: put it to death.

And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (Galatians 5:24)

For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. (Romans 8:13)

Our Justification Puts Us at War

St Paul writes, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 5:1) But this peace with God puts us at odds with the enemies of God, namely the devil, the world and our sinful flesh. When we call the Lord our friend, we call the devil, the world and the sinful flesh our enemies (and they return the favor).

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. (John 15:18-19)

The enmity of the world and hatred of the devil are a mark of the Church, a mark of the Christian. And this enmity is a battle. The Christian is a soldier engaged in a war against the world, flesh and devil.

Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 2:3, see Ephesians 6:10-18, and consider also M. Luther's discussion of prayer in the Large Catechism as a prayer against the devil, world and flesh.)

It is no wonder, then, that the Scriptures picture the Christian life as a battle. The ancient war,

declared by God in the Garden of Eden rages on (Genesis 3:15). The good news in all of this is that we are on the right side of this war. When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden the Lord could have declared war against them, against us. Instead, the Lord declared war against the devil on our behalf. When the Lord put enmity between Eve and the devil, and between her Seed and the devil's seed, that means that we are at war with the devil, but *not at war with God*. And more good news, Jesus has won the war (1 John 3:8, Hebrews 2:14,15, Revelation 12:7-9). Because of the death of Jesus and the forgiveness of our sins we have peace with God (Romans 5:1). But the battles against the world, flesh and devil continue.

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. (1 Peter 2:11)

This Battle is In You, The Two Competing Wills of the Christian

Not only is this battle on the outside as trouble and temptation come from the devil and world, this battle also rages on the inside as we battle with our sinful flesh. This battle is waged within the Christian. This is because the Christians has two opposing wills, the sinful will of the sinful flesh and the will that desires to please God of the new man. This idea is captured in Luther's phrase *simul justus et peccator*, simultaneously justified and sinner. While this is a popular phrase, this is a uniquely Lutheran understanding of the Christian life.

There's some theological background here. The Bible makes a distinction between four different states of man's will. (We are led in this direction by our Lutheran Confessions, The Formula of Concord, II.2, "For since man with [respect to] his free will is found and can be considered in four distinct, dissimilar states...")

The first state of man's will is after his creation before the fall into sin. In the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve had wills that were free to not sin, but they were also (as the tragedy of history testifies) able to sin.

After the fall man's will is in a totally different state. No longer free, the will of man is in bondage to sin, and is not able not to sin. This is the testimony of the Scriptures about original sin. "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot." (Romans 8:7)

The third state of man's will, after conversion, is our major concern with the topic at hand. The Bible teaches that the Christian has two competing and opposing wills, the will of the flesh (or the Old Adam), and the spirit (the new man, see 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ezekiel 36:26). This two wills are fighting against each other, opposing one another, locked in an ongoing battle.

St Paul outlines this battle in dramatic fashion in Romans 7.

So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of

God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. (Romans 7:17-25)

This same idea is reflected in the Epistle to the Galatians.

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. (Galatians 5:16-18)

We can summarize the capabilities of these two wills as follows. According to our sinful flesh we are not able not to sin, but according to the new man we are not able to sin. Consider that! The flesh can do nothing good, nothing right, nothing holy. The spirit can do nothing wrong, nothing sinful. And these two opposite and opposing wills are constantly fight against one another in the Christian's heart. No wonder this life is so much turmoil.

The fourth state of the Christian's will is after death, in heaven and in the resurrection. There we have moved beyond the reach of sin and temptation and the devil and are finally in perfect freedom and bliss. There our wills are totally free to love God and serve our neighbor, and at last we are not able to sin.

These four states of man's will are summarized in the following chart.

	Before the Fall	After the Fall (Original Sin)	After Conversion (The Christian Life)	After the Resurrection
The State of Man's Will	Able to sin or not to sin.	Not able not to sin.	Not able not to sin. (flesh) Not able to sin. (new man)	Not able to sin.

Comparative Anthropology, the Lutheran Difference

This, again, is a uniquely Lutheran anthropology. The other confessions differ about the different states of man's will. The free-will (and semi-free will) theologies of American Evangelicalism and Roman Catholicism have no change in the state of man's will. The Calvinist and Reformed traditions track with the Lutheran church regarding original sin and man's depravity after the fall, but then it is understood that the Christian's will is renewed to the state it was before the fall.

Here's a chart comparing the different confessions.

A Comparison of Different Views of Man's Will				
	Before the Fall	After the Fall	After Conversion (The Christian Life)	After the Resurrection
Roman Catholic/American Evangelical	Able to sin or not to sin.	Able to sin or not to sin.	Able to sin or not to sin.	Not able to sin.
Reformed	Able to sin or not to sin.	Not able not to sin.	Able to sin or not to sin.	Not able to sin.
Lutheran	Able to sin or not to sin.	Not able not to sin.	Not able not to sin. (flesh) Not able to sin. (new man)	Not able to sin.

Notice that all three agree on the state of man's will before the fall; Adam and Eve had the free will to sin or not. The Lord only knows what things would be like if they were able to resist the devil. But notice the difference in the second column. The Roman Catholics and American Evangelicals do not see a change in the state of man's will. While man's will is weak and sick, it is not total deprived and dead. Our wills have a tendency to sin, but this is not sin until it is acted upon. This accounts for the important roll that man's will plays in conversion (be it with the "altar call" or "decision for Christ" of the Evangelicals, or the cooperation with the grace of God of the Roman Catholics).

The Reformed and Lutherans track together on the state of man's will after the fall, we are only able to sin (total depravity, original sin), but consider the states of man's will conversion.

But it is in the all important third column that we see the source of the different teachings regarding sanctification. It is this difference about the state of man's will after conversion that accounts for the different theologies of sanctification. (This is also why so many theologians insist that Romans 7 describes Paul before his conversion. Their understanding of the Christian's renewed will won't allow the text to describe a Christian man.) If the Christian has a will that is free to sin or not sin, then sanctification is simply going to be a matter of strengthening or supporting or teaching or training this free will.

If this is your theology of the Christian's will then your teaching of sanctification often boils down to "Do Better!" "Try harder!" Maybe the Lord has some helpful principles or some power-boosting spirit infusion, but the idea is the same, doing good or doing bad is up to you. Sanctification is about training, coaching, instructing, strengthening, growing, etc., etc., etc. until we obtain some victory.

Not only is this understanding of the Christian's will and sanctification wrong, it is dangerous. It invites growth when the Scriptures call for death. It looks for strength where the Scriptures call for repentance. The idea that our wills are renewed leaves the door open for the devil's temptation to pride ("I'm doing it.") and despair ("I'll never get it right.")

Our sinful flesh can't be whipped into shape; it can't be reformed, it can't grow or do good, and trying to do so only results in failure. Remember the pit bull? Our sinful flesh has to be fought, killed.

For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. (Romans 8:13)

[P]ut off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires. (Ephesians 4:22)

We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. (Romans 6:6)

But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. (Romans 13:14)

There is no reform here. These passages are not about reforming the flesh, but killing it, crucifying it, putting it away.

Repentance is Death and Resurrection

This putting to death the Old Adam and raising the new man to life is repentance.

For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Romans 6:10-11)

When the Lord's law and Gospel have their way with us, the result is repentance.

The law shows us our failure, or faults, our impurity and imperfections, our sins. And in the heart of the Christian the knowledge of our sin produces sorrow, contrition. It brings our sin to light, exposes the sinful flesh and its shame. This is the first part of repentance, worked in us by the Holy Spirit through the law of God (see John 16:8,9, see Acts 2:37 and the penitential Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143). This is the death of the sinful flesh, its crucifixion.

The Gospel has the opposite effect. While the law shows us our sin and God's wrath; the Gospel forgives our sins and gives us the love of God in Christ. The law produces contrition, the Gospel produces faith (Romans 1:16,17, 10:17). The Lord comes to us with the victory of Jesus on the cross, with His atoning sacrifice and the promise of the forgiveness of all of our sins. The Gospel brings forgiveness and life, resurrection.

Repentance, then, is a death and resurrection wrought in us by the Holy Spirit through the Lord's law and Gospel. Repentance is the Lord fighting this battle against our flesh and giving the victory to the new man. The life of repentance is sanctification.

Sanctification is Suffering (An Aside)

Much of the talk of sanctification in the church today is about success. This is the precise opposite of the Bible's teaching about the subject. When Jesus calls His followers He does not bid them to take up their Lazy-Boy or their new sports car, but a cross.

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up

his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? (Matthew 16:24-26)

A disciple of Jesus is a follower of Jesus, and the way He walks is the way of suffering. It was necessary for the Son of Man to suffer before He entered into glory. (Luke 24:26, Acts 17:3) The Scriptures are replete with exhortations to endure suffering, to be patient in suffering, even to rejoice in suffering.

More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Romans 5:3-5)

In fact, in the one place that the Scriptures tell us that Jesus is our example to follow, He is our example in suffering.

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. (1 Peter 2:21)

There are often terribly false expectations offered to the Lord's people, promises of success, personal prosperity, vanishing temptations and temporal blessings. These false expectations are dangerous, a setup for "failure", because Jesus promises His followers, again, the exact opposite:

I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. *In the world you will have tribulation*. But take heart; I have overcome the world. (John 16:33)

We labor in this life of sin and temptation and death. We know by the law of God the sin that troubles us, but we rejoice that the Lord does not hold our sin against us, that He has set us free from the slavery to sin, and that He will, on the last day, destroy every ounce of sin that dwells in us and in the world.

The Baptismal Connection

When Paul wants to talk about the life of the new man and the death of the old, he almost always points us to our baptism. Consider these wonderful words from Romans 6:1-7:

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin.

Baptism, then, is this death of the flesh and the resurrection on the new man.

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the

body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. (Colossians 2:11-14)

It is in baptism that our sinful flesh is put to death. It is in baptism that the new man is raised to newness of life. We are baptized into a life of repentance.

Luther has this very clear for us in the Small Catechism.

What does such baptizing with water signify?

It signifies that the old Adam in us should, by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil lusts, and, again, a new man daily come forth and arise; who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

Where is this written?

St. Paul says Romans, chapter 6: *We are buried with Christ by Baptism into death, that, like as He was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.*

We find that baptism is the battleground of the Christian life. The devil is always tempting us to doubt the gifts the Lord gives us in our baptism (about this, consider the temptation of our Lord, where the devil tempts Him to doubt the very words spoken to Him by the Father in His baptism. Compare the words of the Father in Matthew 3:17, "This is my beloved Son," and the devil in Matthew 4:3 and 4:6, "If you are the Son of God..."). On the other hand, the Lord is always strengthening us in His promises and gifts, bringing us back to the gifts of our baptism. ("Do you not know..." Paul says in Romans 6:4).

This, then, is our Christian life. We are baptized. Our flesh is daily crucified, and the new man daily hears the Gospel, the forgiveness of sins, and rejoices in the gifts of Christ. How different this is to the "Do better! Try harder!" of most talk of sanctification! We rejoice on being the objects of God's work, His craftsmanship, shaped through repentance worked by the Lord's law and Gospel.

Our life is marked by this fight between the flesh and the Spirit, but praise to to Jesus that this battle will soon end. When the Lord Jesus returns for us He will set us free from this sinful flesh, and will completely purify our bodies from sin and temptation and death. We now have the Lord's victory over sin and flesh by faith, and one day we will have this same victory by sight. The resurrection will mark the end of this battle and the complete victory of our Jesus over our sin. Paul's great discussion of this battle concludes with this note of doxology of hope.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:21-25)

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Trinity 16, 2010