

Luther on Sanctification

1. Not the least interesting thing to me about Luther's treatise, "On the Councils and the Church" (*LW*, 41: 3-178), is the way in which it completely overthrows an image of Luther based on the judgment of John Wesley that, "while Luther was excellent on the subject of justification, he displayed in his *Galatians* 'a total ignorance with regard to sanctification'" (P. S. Watson, "Editor's Preface," in *A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*: 13). I don't think that Wesley's judgment is fair even to the Luther of *Galatians*. But it is shown to be totally wide of the mark by Luther's teaching in this treatise.

2. Indeed, Luther is here as explicit as Wesley could ever be in clearly distinguishing between "*redemptio*" and "*vivificatio et sanctificatio*," or "*sanctificatio et vivificatio Spiritus Sancti*" (144, 114). "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." Or again, "[Christ] has purchased redemption from sin and death so that the Holy Spirit might transform us out of the old Adam into new men—we die unto sin and live unto righteousness, beginning and growing here on earth and perfecting it beyond" (114). Thus the church is rightly understood to be "the holy Christian people . . . in whom Christ lives, works, and rules, *per redemptionem*, 'through grace and the remission of sin,' and the Holy Spirit, *per vivificationem et sanctificationem*, 'through daily purging of sin and renewal of life,' so that we do not remain in sin but are enabled and obliged to lead a new life, abounding in all kinds of good works, as the Ten Commandments or the two tables of Moses' law command, and not in old evil works" (144). Christians are "a people with a special call and are therefore called not just *ecclesia*, 'church,' or 'people,' but *sancta catholica Christiana*, that is, 'a Christian holy people' who believe in Christ . . . and have the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies them daily, not only through the forgiveness of sin acquired for them by Christ (as the Antinomians foolishly believe), but also through the abolition, the purging, and the mortification of sins, on the basis of which they are called a holy people" (143 f.). "Christian holiness" as "an entity common to all churches and all Christians in the world" (whence the

designation "catholic") "is found where the Holy Spirit gives people faith in Christ and thus sanctifies them, Acts 15 [:9], that is, he renews heart, soul, body, work, and conduct, inscribing the commandments of God not on tables of stone, but in hearts of flesh" (145). It's clear from all of these passages that, for Luther every bit as much as for Wesley, Christian holiness includes, in Wesley's terms, the "real" change of sanctification and regeneration as well as the "relative" change of justification. And if Wesley can insist that without holiness no one will see the Lord, Luther can insist that "a Christian should either have the Holy Spirit and lead a new life, or know that he has no Christ" (115). "For there is no such Christ [*sc.* as the Antinomians preach] that died for sinners who do not, after the forgiveness of sins, desist from sins and lead a new life" (114).

3. It is significant, however, that, while Luther thus clearly distinguishes between the redemptive work of Christ and the sanctifying, revivifying work of the Holy Spirit, he does not distinguish in the way in which Wesley does between "justification" and "sanctification" as two distinct, if closely related, aspects of salvation. Rather, he speaks simply of "sanctification," meaning by this the whole work of salvation effected by the Spirit on the ground of Christ's meritorious life and death. The Spirit applies to the case of the contemporary believer(s) both the "grace" and the "gift" that Christ has already earned for us. Thus Luther says, "Christian holiness, or the holiness common to Christendom, is found where the Holy Spirit gives people faith in Christ and thus sanctifies them, Acts 15 [:9], that is, he renews heart, soul, body, work, and conduct, inscribing the commandments of God not on tables of stone, but in hearts of flesh" (145). But if Luther's use of the term "sanctification" thus refers to the whole event or process of transformation properly called "salvation," as distinct from Wesley's use of it to refer to but one aspect of salvation, Luther, for his part, distinguishes between two aspects or phases of sanctification itself. In the first aspect or phase, "the Holy Spirit effects in us a daily sanctification and vivification in Christ, according to the first table of Moses." Indeed, thanks to this aspect or phase of the Spirit's work, we actually obey this first table, "albeit never as perfectly as Christ," even though "we constantly strive to attain the goal, under his redemption or remission of sin, until we too shall one day become perfectly holy and no longer stand in need of forgiveness" (166). In other

words, we are brought to the "true knowledge of God" which is faith—thereby fulfilling the first commandment—and, together with faith, to hope and love. The effect of this change "is called new holy life in the soul, in accordance with the first table of Moses." But "it is also called *tres virtutes theologicas*, 'the three principal virtues of Christians,' namely faith, hope, and love" (166). In a second aspect or phase, however, "the Holy Spirit sanctifies us according to the second table of Moses" (166). "In accordance with the second table, [the Holy Spirit] also sanctifies Christians in the body," which is to say, in doing whatever the commandments of the second table of the law require in the way of behaving justly toward our neighbor, etc. (146). In his way, then, Luther could be said to make Wesley's distinction between "inward" and "outward" holiness, both of which are the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

4. It seems clear, however, that the two distinctions—between the two tables of Moses' law, on the one hand, and between a new holy life in the soul and a new holy life in the body, on the other—do not exactly correspond. As much as the first commandment may indeed be said to be a matter of the soul, and thus to call for inward holiness, the other commandments of the first table, on Luther's own exegesis of them, very much have to do with the body as well as the soul, and thus with outward as well as inward holiness. On the other hand, Luther never fails to recognize that the commandments of the second table cannot really be fulfilled except from "an honest and good heart," or, in other words, without the inward holiness of faith working through love (167). Moreover, Luther himself indicates that the real distinction between the two tables is, in my terms, that between "explicit" witness, in the case of the first table, and "implicit" witness, in the case of the second (165 ff.). Obedience to the first table—which is to say, faith—expresses itself through "the seven holy possessions of the church," or "the seven principal parts of Christian sanctification," viz., the word of God, baptism, the holy sacrament of the altar, the office of the keys, the calling of ministers, public praise and thanksgiving to God, and the sacred cross (166). On the other hand, it is by means of these same seven forms of explicit witness that the Holy Spirit sanctifies the church in the first aspect or phase of the Spirit's sanctifying work. Similarly, obedience to the second table—which is to say, love active through justice—expresses itself through "the other

outward signs that identify the Christian church," even as, on the other hand, it is by means of these very signs that "the Holy Spirit sanctifies us according to the second table of Moses" (166).

5. It is not entirely clear to me as of this reading, however, how it is, exactly, that the Holy Spirit sanctifies Christians through these other outward signs. That the Spirit enables us to fulfill the commandments of the second table and that our actual fulfillments of them are, indeed, signs that identify us as Christians, and the church as the Christian church, is not difficult to understand. But how the Spirit sanctifies us through such fulfillments is by no means clear. Is Luther's point, perhaps, that it is not we ourselves who are thus sanctified, but, rather, others, for whom our implicit witness functions as an *example*, even as the seven principal parts of sanctification, or the seven holy possessions of the church, are the explicit witness that functions as a *sacrament*, to mediate the gift of a new and holy life that God through Christ makes possible for us?

11 April 1994