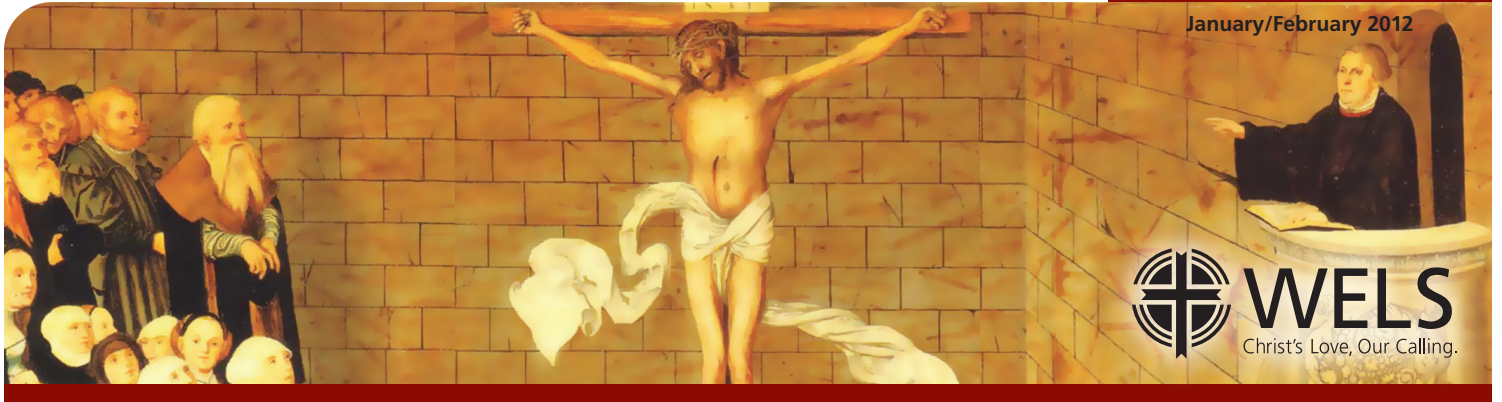


Preach the Word

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Preaching Sanctification Flowing from and Empowered by the Gospel

Proclaim Grace! Key Issue #8

By Richard Gurgel

Has anyone ever insisted that the Lutheran pulpit's hallmark is insightful sanctification preaching?

Without apology, Lutheran preaching's main focus is Jesus' life, death, and resurrection and the status of "righteous" he procured for us. Lutherans are cautious lest sanctification preaching hovers like an ominous "if" over that status as God's children and heirs.

Unfortunately, legitimate concerns easily become paralyzing fears. Not wanting to compromise justification, we can downplay or omit legitimate ways Scripture urges us to "live a life worthy of the calling [we] have received" (Ephesians 4:1). A leader of another Lutheran denomination put his concerns this way:

I think we've historically done and continue to do a good job on the justification side, but I think people are searching more and more for this: "Tell me what this means for me as a child of God as I live?"

A WLS professor echoed him.

We preach law and gospel, we get people all gassed up, but we give them no direction where to go. And that leaves you a little bit flat. You don't really see how this gospel can help you to be more than conquerors in this aspect of life you're struggling with or that the text mentioned as an issue.

Ironically, we undermine the very justification preaching we treasure when we fail to give direction for sanctified living or give it timidly as a clumsy add-on!

If I give little or no specific direction for life, my hearers may conclude that there's nowhere they need to go. But even a spiritual nature abhors a vacuum. If the Spirit's agenda for our lives isn't presented clearly, the sinful nature, the sinful world, and our prowling archenemy happily supply a faith-suffocating substitute agenda (Romans 8:13).

How important for Lutheran preachers to pay careful attention to Paul in Galatians. There is no letter more focused on dealing a knockout blow to work-righteous arrogance. Paul spends four and a half chapters blocking every avenue for confidence in works for salvation. But from Galatians 5:13 on he zeroes in on what it means to "live by the Spirit." There's no shortage of specific direction for what that will look like in our lives.

Paul certainly was not compromising the main thrust of his book when he shifted his attention to what a sanctified life looks like. Neither need we compromise the glory of justification *sola gratia* and *sola fide* when we help God's people glimpse the glory of what it looks like when gospel-empowered children of God show themselves "eager to do what is good" (Titus 2:14).

For the sake of the eternal souls before us, we cannot quit the sanctification preaching field as if this were merely the province of uninformed Evangelicals (and confused Lutherans) who will never understand that preaching is primarily gospel proclamation.

But do you know why it is even more tragic when Lutherans yield that field or believe they must be schooled by others for how to do it? Lutheran theology uniquely positions us to offer rich insight to the visible church on preaching sanctification. Lutherans are not pitiful paupers begging a few crumbs from others more well-to-do theologically in sanctification. Right within our heritage we possess wealth just waiting to enrich our encouragements to sanctified living.

Lutherans do not need to feel that we have entered a "strange land" when we preach sanctification. Instead we bring our general gospel predominance right along with us as we cross the border from justification to sanctification. Here too, Christ retains central place!



The Blessings of Proclaiming Christ's Active Obedience

Two aspects of biblical doctrine dear to Lutheran theology offer our hearers and the church at large a distinctive approach to sanctification.

The first, not surprisingly, takes us back to the supporting field of justification. It is a hallmark of Lutheran theology to proclaim not only the passive obedience of Christ but also his active obedience. We believe Jesus' whole life is substitutionary from his first infant breath until he breathed his last. Jesus' thirty-three years of life weren't merely a grand overture marking time until the real symphony sounded on Good Friday.

Christ's whole work is summarized as obedience (Romans 5:19). That includes obedience to every commandment of both tables of the law, from his delighting in God's Word in the temple as a twelve-year-old to his being obedient to Mary and Joseph (Luke 2:41-52).

We are a world of prodigals who countless have shouted "No!" in our Father's face. But here is the Son who ceaselessly answered with a perfectly willing "Yes!"

"Here I am, I have come—it is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart" (Psalm 40:7-8). No wonder the Father's heavenly stamp of approval thunderously bookends his Son's public ministry: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17; 17:5).

Ever since my baptism, I wear that obedience as my own. The Father's words of approval resound over me, marking me as a fully loved (adopted) son and heir (Galatians 3:26-29).

What an immense impact on sanctification when that is proclaimed! Sanctification ceases to be a fulfillment of the

law by which I try to earn enough points so that God might—someday, maybe—fully love me. That would be a slave's obedience, fearfully and feverishly straining to win over a harsh, demanding master. Instead, I offer a loved child's obedience with no bargaining for my Father's approval. I delight in him who *already* smiles on me as my dear Abba (Romans 8:15). He has been well pleased ever since my baptism where he washed me from sin and clothed me with his Son's holiness. I am his Son's spotless bride (Ephesians 5:27).

Yes, I know, our sinful nature is a ball and chain that we drag around with us that needs to be drowned every day in the contrition the law works (a daily trip back to baptism!). But there at my personal Jordan (just as at his Supper) I find also the power of the gospel that declares me forgiven and clothed in the dazzling splendor of my bridegroom. Such daily doses of lavish love beget lavish love (1 John 3:1-3).

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Let me explain at least one reason why that's true. In a preaching course I took with Dr. Bryan Chapell, I noticed he was professing belief in the substitutionary nature of Christ's life. During a break in class, I asked him why I found that so rarely in Evangelical authors. His blunt appraisal stunned me. He answered that many are afraid to tell people that Jesus' fulfilled the law in their place since it would remove a key motivation for living a sanctified life.

Do you hear the unmistakable echo of Rome's rejection of Reformation teaching? The burden this lays on sanctification is palpable. The free obedience of one already declared to be a fully obedient child is compromised. The club of the law to coerce holy behavior—since "without holiness no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14)—threatens to overwhelm the empowering gospel that alone produces real fruit.

My dear Lutheran brothers, whenever the text allows, trumpet from your pulpits the beauty of the active obedience of Christ. What a wondrous and freeing truth we unleash whenever we remember to proclaim the glory of the life of Christ along with the beauty of the death of Christ! Announcing that every demand of the law has been fulfilled *does not reduce* genuine fruit. It *produces* it! Such is the power of grace. It accomplishes what a hundred thousand laws can never produce: a son or daughter's delightful obedience mirroring Jesus' own.



Open Eyes to the Divine Glory of Being God's Masks

Another arrow in the Lutheran theologian's quiver practically jumps out to volunteer for duty when preaching sanctification. It's the teaching of Christian vocation.

In our gospel empowered zeal to serve our Savior, he redirects our efforts toward being his masks through whom he blesses our neighbor. In my vocations, I can glorify his name in everything he's given me to do (1 Corinthians 10:31) as if I were Christ himself serving my neighbor (Galatians 2:20). Then comes the stunning bonus: in pure grace Christ considers all that we've done by his power—washed from impurities in his blood—as if it were done directly for him! That's such a mindboggling mystery it will still stun us on the Last Day (Matthew 25:34-40).

In vocation, Jesus restores to us one of the two chief purposes for creating human beings in his image. In Jesus, not only do we again enjoy companionship with God as Adam and Eve once knew it (the image's ultimate purpose—Genesis 3:8), we also again live out being his visible representatives on earth (the image's other purpose—Genesis 1:27-28).

Christ has freed us to see all of life re-versed into a melodious Te Deum that will echo through eternity

Once the Spirit's call to faith made us "a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father" (Revelation 1:6), every other God-given calling falls into its high and holy position. These callings are "holy" because the one called is a royal priest cleansed in Christ's blood and covered with Christ's righteousness. The callings are "high" because they come from our Father in heaven.

Think what happens to sanctification zeal when we and our people grasp more and more this glorious truth! Instead of the mournful dirge of "everything is meaningless" (Ecclesiastes 1:2) of life lived apart from God, Christ has freed us to see all of life re-versed into a melodious *Te Deum* that will echo through eternity.

Who among our hearers doesn't need to be energized by seeing their hand as the Savior's hand in even the most mundane tasks of daily life? To grasp the beauty of our vocations fills with divine meaning everything from changing a diaper to punching the clock.

When seen through the lens of vocation, sanctification is no longer a tedious crossing off of "to-do's" from an endless list of what we're "supposed to do" to prove ourselves "obedient." Instead, every station of life becomes a true holy place where those *already* declared holy as children of God carry out holy tasks "prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10).

Please notice, however, that the doctrine of vocation refuses to rank any God-given calling as holier than another. We are Lutheran preachers, not voters in some kind of Bowl Championship Series poll determining which vocation is truly #1. It was precisely in reaction against Rome's privileging some vocations above others that Luther emphasized every calling as high and holy.

We must not create a Lutheran monasticism by getting so caught up in urging lay involvement at church and school (a very good thing!) or on mission trips (often world-view expanding!) that God's people get the impression that the only truly holy works are those listed in the bulletin or carried out in some distant mission field. We thereby blind them to the divine service to neighbors in their own homes or just down the street. Rebuilding monastic walls to separate the more holy from the less holy would stand the doctrine of vocation (and justification) on its head.

Yes, that also means the doctrine of vocation urges public ministers to put away our foam-finger #1 signs lest our conceit slip out while ministering among God's holy people. Is our calling unique in *how* it serves God? Certainly. Is there authority in the public use of the means of grace that God through his royal priests entrusts to those he and they call into public ministry? Indeed. But it wasn't without reason that Jesus repeatedly warned his disciples about not misusing their God-given vocations to jockey for #1 position.

The doctrine of vocation exalts each believer as God's mask in unique ways, but it ranks none of us over others.



Driving Safely Down “Sanctification Avenue”

“Sanctification Avenue” is an icy preaching highway with deep ditches on either side. We slip toward one ditch or the other if we downplay the significance of either side of the theological maxim that we’re *simul justus et peccator*.

A caring pastor, bleeding for the hurt sin brings to lives, quickly forgets his hearers’ greatest need isn’t legal information but gospel transformation. Offering endless—often gospel-less—advice, he drops a tire onto the moralistic shoulder as he slides toward the ditch marked “legalism.” He doesn’t take seriously enough that we’re *justus*.

But there’s a uniquely Lutheran over-steering that spins us toward the opposite ditch marked “antinomianism.” The preacher is so intent on safeguarding gospel predominance that he speaks few (if any) imperatives. He tacitly invites hearers to choose between “Self-Chosen Holiness Highway” or “License Alley.” He doesn’t take seriously enough that we’re *peccator*.

Here are some dashboard warning lights for safe driving on Sanctification Avenue:

Moralism/Legalism Warnings

- Pastor, it’s ten o’clock in your sermon, do your magisterial gospel indicatives know where your ministerial law imperatives are? Since law always accuses (Apology, IV), law imperatives left out alone late in sermons quickly become delinquent. Our good biblical advice isn’t wrong *in* itself. It’s wrong *by* itself (Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 294).
- Don’t let impatience for growth lead to shaming or coercing as if driving beef to the butcher. You’re urging a *willing* new self to live who he *already* is. Your most critical sanctification sentences lift hearers’ sights to their identity as Christ’s spotless bride freed from sin’s guilt *and power* (Romans 6:18). (Hint: coercion often follows weak law-as-mirror preaching. Failing to crucify the old Adam, I try scolding him into submission.)
- Here’s a bottom line question as I imagine saying “Amen” to a newborn sermon on my monitor: “When my listeners walk out the doors . . . with whom do they walk? If they march to battle the world, the flesh, and the devil with only me, myself, and I, then each parades to despair. However, if the sermon has led all persons to God’s grace, then they may walk into the world with their Savior—and with fresh hope. Whether people depart alone or with the Savior marks the difference between futility and faith, legalism and true obedience, do-goodism and real godliness” (Chapell, 295).

Antinomian Warnings

- While law *always* accuses, we misuse the Confessions and distort Scripture if we state categorically that law *only* accuses. The Confessions state that “only” to declare law unable to comfort contrite hearts (Apology, XII). Don’t leave people stranded without clear direction about daily life “so what” and “now what” implications of the gospel they’ve heard. The wings of gospel empowered spontaneity are not clipped by being as directive as your text.
- We hinder fruits of faith if we fail to speak empowering gospel and directing law when our inspired text has a specific sanctification goal. We become sanctification *Schwärmer*: preachers who assume all sanctification is spontaneous without utilizing God’s tools to accomplish it. There’s mystery here we cannot fully solve. Through the gospel God empowers all sanctified willing and doing (Philippians 2:13). Yet Scripture also directs imperatives to our new self (Philippians 2:12). We misuse the former if we use it to cancel the latter. “It is certain that on the basis of this power we can and should be cooperating with [the Holy Spirit]” (Formula of Concord, II). “Man must be denied all credit but dare never be relieved of full responsibility” (Köberle, *The Quest for Holiness*, viii).
- A WLS professor adds: “When our people talk about a need for sanctification preaching, I don’t think we can simply dismiss that by saying, ‘Well, they have just been too influenced by Evangelicals.’ They may be missing something that rightly belongs in good Lutheran preaching.”



Online Resources

- Three sermon MP3’s with full-text and commentary applying this topic to concrete texts.
- Four helpful articles for preaching gospel predominating sanctification.
 - Mark Paustian’s essay “*Unleashing Our Calling: Today’s Christians Find Fulfillment in Their Vocation*” (2006 Symposium on Christian Vocation).
 - Paul Wendland’s essay “*How God Grows Christians*.”
 - Paul Raabe and James Voelz’s article “*Why Exhort a Good Tree?*” (*Concordia Journal*, April 1996).
 - Timothy Saleska’s article “*The Two Kinds of Righteousness: What’s a Preacher to Do?*” (*Concordia Journal*, April 2007).