



BECOMING LIKE CHRIST: THE CHALCEDONIAN LUTHER AND HOLINESS

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Abstract:

Lutheran Theology is commonly accused of having a “weak” doctrine of sanctification, resting primarily on the doctrine of justification by grace through faith apart from works of the Law. Recent attempts at rehabilitating a properly Lutheran doctrine of sanctification attempt to restore an understanding of holiness as personal and progressive without compromising a Lutheran commitment to the primacy of justification. Such explorations of a properly Lutheran doctrine of holiness cannot be divorced from a robust Christology, recognizing Christ’s own person as the nexus where human nature and divine holiness coalesce. This paper will explore Luther as a Chalcedonian theologian, and his use of Christological language to speak intelligibly about human sanctification.

Key words:

Luther, Sanctification, Holiness, Chalcedon, *Communicatio Idiomatum*, Relationship

Introduction

It has been something of increasing interest to explore what a truly Lutheran doctrine of holiness looks like. In Lutheranism, justification of course predominates sanctification, and the second use of the Law over the third. Good works and sanctification always must be taught in view of justification, in view of what God has done *for us*. Contemporary Lutherans seem almost afraid of the word “sanctification” or of the concept of the third use of the Law. It is feared that any talk of progress in the Christian life leads into Evangelicalism, Reformed Theology, or Pietism. Preaching preferably utilizes a Law-Gospel paradigm without any exhortation unto good works. For such a reason Lutherans have historically been vulnerable to accusations of antinomianism. A realistically dismal anthropology seemingly suggests that everything humans do being sin, there is no real impetus for good works.

Perhaps much of the trepidation among Lutheran theologians to speak boldly about holiness arises from the fear that to speak of holiness is to speak about human work and thus deemphasize the work of God. Luther himself has been vulnerable to critique that his theology is too dependent on satiating the human conscience. Such critique seems to arise out of disdain for Enlightenment individualism, and hinges on Luther’s own tormented

conversion experience. In his controversial 1966 book *Das Ich im Glauben bei Martin Luther: Der Ursprung der Anthropozentrischen Religion*,¹ Paul Hacker interpreted Luther's concept of faith "seizing" salvation as something ego-driven.¹ For Hacker, Luther understands salvation as resulting from one's individual belief, an exercise which begins and returns to the self. Such, as his subtitle pithily asserts, establishes an anthropocentric religion. While this interpretation is far from Luther's intent, one may simultaneously safely say that Luther's religion is indeed anthropocentric; it just happens that ὁ ἄνθρωπος at the center of Luther's religion is also ὁ Θεός.

This paper will explore some ways in which Luther's Christological convictions regarding the true and perfect union of God and humanity in Christ give him a framework within which to speak about human holiness.

Luther's Christology

That Luther's theology rests on the integrity of the God-Man, and that he is worth taking seriously as a Chalcedonian theologian, is not lost on other critics of Luther, notable among them, Yves Congar. Likewise writing on the eve of the Second Vatican Council, Congar suggested that Luther's Christology presents Christ's humanity as merely a "location" for God to effect salvation. He writes, "Luther tends to see this humanity not as the cause of our salvation, but instead as a place and situation (*lieu et situation*) where 'God' alone operates salvation."²

Congar questions what exactly Luther considers the "contribution of the man Jesus in the work of salvation."³ Doing so, he seems to have the opposite concern of Hacker. If the value of the union of human and divine natures in Christ is, for example, entirely in its utility in the work of salvation, then the person and mission of Christ appear lopsided. Congar does not intend to open Luther up to accusations of Nestorianism, but rather to highlight what is perhaps an over-emphasis on the operation of God in Christ, at the expense of any mystery that as mediator Christ stands on the side of humanity as much as he as savior stands on the

¹ Paul Hacker, *Das Ich im Glauben bei Martin Luther: Der Ursprung der Anthropozentrischen Religion* (Graz: Styria, 1966) republished in English on the occasion of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation as *Faith in Luther: Martin Luther and the Origin of Anthropocentric Religion* (Steubenville, Ohio, 2017).

² Yves Congar, "Regards et réflexions sur la christologie de Luther," in *Chalkedon heute: Das Konzil von Chalkedon: Geschichte und Gegenwart*, vol. 3 (Würzburg: Echter, 1954), 457–86. See Vidar L. Haangs, "Christological Themes in Luther's Theology," *Studia Theologica* 61 (2007): 26–27.

³ Yves Congar, *Martin Luther, Sa Foi, Sa Réforme: Études de Théologie Historique* (Paris: Cerf, 1983), 130.

side of God. This critique imagines that for Luther the human nature in Christ is as ineffective as that of every human being. According to Congar, Luther's Christology is a Christology of "God's sole efficacy" (*Christologie de l'Alleenwirksamkeit Gottes*).

These vastly divergent readings of Luther address a real concern regarding his preoccupation with human (in)capacity in salvation. If human beings do not contribute towards their salvation in any respect, then how can Christ be said to accomplish salvation as one who is truly human as well as truly divine?

What Luther does in essence is shift away from a medieval understanding of grace as a supernatural substance to one of understanding grace as a relationship, as a stance before God. This is truly a Chalcedonian move. Luther uses the Chalcedonian pattern to suggest how human righteousness is possible. The pervasive employment of a Chalcedonian pattern by Luther has received little attention. Johannes Zachhuber's Marquette Lectures investigate the topic at some length.⁴ George Hunsinger draws attention to Karl Barth's indebtedness to Luther's Chalcedonian structuring in his treatment of grace and freedom coexisting "without confusion or change." The analogy is perhaps most blatantly used by Luther in his treatise *Against Latomus*. For Luther here, the justified sinner is corollary to the Chalcedonian Christ, as in both instances, we predicate "both natures, with all their properties, of the whole person"⁵ and yet care is taken so as not to neither confuse nor separate the two. Just as Christ is at once fully human and fully divine, so also is the believer at once completely a sinner and yet also completely a righteous person. As long as sin remains in me, Luther believes, it in some sense determines my person as a whole; and yet by faith my person and all my works are always also determined by something greater than my sin—both in reality and in hope.

Let us dive deeper into Luther's Chalcedonian mind.

For Luther, the internal freedom that is the result of justification is manifest in external works of love for one's neighbor. With this in mind, an investigation into Luther's understanding of holiness will ask the question, "From where come spontaneous acts of love towards one's neighbor?" Luther's interest in the Christian's motivation for good works give us insights into what sanctification looks like for him.

⁴ Johannes, Zachhuber, *Luther's Christological Legacy: Christocentrism and the Chalcedonian Tradition* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2017).

⁵ Luther's Works, American Edition (Hereafter "LW") 32:257.

Luther's discussions of good works that a believer performs invariably return to the topic of that person's salvation. In this context, he shows his hesitancy to ascribe moral virtue to any good works that are done apart from Christ.⁶ In his sermon of 1521 *On the Three Kinds of Good Life for the Instruction of Consciences*, Luther addresses the question of why a Christian does good.⁷ He answers that the failure of attempts to justify oneself by good works lies in the unrighteousness that motivates those works. While one is moved to genuine goodness by love, acts that are unrighteous are the product of self-interested or self-serving motivations:

"We do not really want to be righteous; we only pretend because we are afraid of being punished or disgraced, or because we seek our own ends and pleasure in these works. And no one is righteous solely and alone for God's sake, the way it ought to be. The natural man wants to and has to seek something whereby he may be righteous. He is not able and has no desire to be righteous for righteousness' sake. He does not allow himself to be content with righteousness, as he ought to do, but it is determined by means of it either to earn something or escape something. [...] We ought not be good to earn something or avoid something, for that is to behave no better than a hireling, a bondsman, a journeyman, and not as willing children and heirs who are righteous only for righteousness' sake, that is, for God's own sake alone, for God himself is righteousness, truth, goodness, wisdom, holiness. He who seeks nothing other than holiness is the one who seeks God himself, and he will find him. He who seeks reward, however, and avoids pain, never finds him at all and makes reward his God. Whatever it is that makes a man do something, that motive is his god."⁸

Luther does two things in this text. First, he presents an assessment of fallen humanity that precludes any claim to virtue as achieving righteousness before God. In doing so he upholds his claim made in the *Heidelberg Disputation* about the total incapacity of the human will. Second, Luther equates God with righteousness itself. This is an important claim for several reasons. Luther is establishing that righteousness is not an object or quality to be possessed so much as a relationship to be entered into. Therefore, righteousness is not a kind of "thing" acquired from God who possesses, or something outside God that God may observe the human being pursue and obtain. Likewise, righteousness cannot be attained apart from God, since to desire righteousness is identical with desiring God. Thus, for Luther,

⁶ Relevant to our overall purposes, Simo Peura makes this point when he says that Luther "typically refuses to distinguish between the question of salvation and the question of ethics." See Simo Peura, "What God Gives Man Receives: Luther on Salvation," in *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, eds. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 78.

⁷ LW 44:231-42.

⁸ LW 44:241.

to desire righteousness, holiness, or other divine attributes for the sake of reward or otherwise for one's own sake is not only fruitless but is also idolatrous. Even the joy of heaven or the blessing of God, when it is desired for oneself, reveals that the goal is really self-interested. Following the principle that whatever serves as a motive for human action is god for the actor, the logic of Luther's position forces the conclusion that one who does things for love of self is his own god.

A Good Motivation for Good Works

Rather than the result of any form of self-interested love, Luther sees genuine good works and holiness as the consequence of a self-emptying that disregards one's own gain and profit. This does not mean that achieving righteousness necessitates that the individual is working against her own self-interest. Neither does it negate the objective value of certain acts of civil righteousness that one may accomplish. It is rather to say that righteousness before God is achieved apart from preoccupation with one's own self.⁹ Luther's *Freedom of a Christian* explains that this is possible because the believing Christian already possesses the fullness of love and joy by faith and thus lacks nothing else that it should desire.¹⁰ The Christian, herself being an image of Christ, is like him "content with this form of God which [s]he has obtained."¹¹ As works come naturally for the human person, the works of a Christian are undertaken with the contentment of faith, so that knowing she lacks nothing she can direct her works outwards. Such a person is able to serve free from self-interest because she by faith is like Christ, already knowing God, and enjoys God in such a way that she is entirely content. Luther describes this as a "confidence towards God."¹² This confidence excludes any lack that might drive an individual to act in her own self-interest. Indeed, it is the very compulsion to act in this way from which Luther holds the Christian is freed. As a result, the Christian "knows all things, can do all things, ventures everything that needs to be done [...] gladly and willingly [...] because it is a pleasure for him to please God in doing these things."¹³ Reward simply

⁹ Jennifer Herdt explains Luther's requirement of the law as being that "we put our trust in God rather than in ourselves." See Jennifer Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 176.

¹⁰ LW 31:367.

¹¹ LW 31:366.

¹² LW 44:6.

¹³ *Ibid.*

cannot motivate righteousness in Luther's mind. What drives righteous behavior is that Christ lives in the believer (see Galatians 2:20).¹⁴

In short, for Luther faith not only justifies but also is the source of holy living. Thus, Paul Althaus is correct in asserting that justification by grace through faith "presupposes" the ethical life.¹⁵ In his *Treatise on Good Works*, Luther clarifies what makes a work good. First, Luther would have us understand that God has plainly instructed human beings regarding good works: that which is God-pleasing and holy has been commanded in scripture, and that which is sinful has been condemned. "Therefore, whoever wants to know what good works are as well as doing them needs to know nothing more than God's commandments."¹⁶ However, if a commandment is kept out of fear or for personal gain, it remains a sin *coram deo*, even though it may outwardly accomplish good. As Jennifer Herdt explains, "The kind of purity of intention central to Christian virtue is not something we can create in ourselves."¹⁷ Thus, unless these commandments are kept in faith, they are not kept rightly. To put it differently, for Luther only a Christian can fulfill the commandments righteously, because only a Christian can be said to fulfill them in faith. In his study of early Luther on the conscience, Michael Baylor describes the way in which faith shifts the center of moral concern away from the self and locates it in God:

"[...] it is faith which confers on the conscience the ability correctly to judge, as God judges, persons before actions and actions in the light of persons. Or, perhaps more accurately, faith is the power of the conscience to accept God's judgements about the person rather than those which the conscience arrives at naturally, or by inference from actions."¹⁸

Baylor is arguing that for Luther faith allows the conscience to shed its preoccupation with the self and accept the judgment that God makes. The concern is no longer any result which the individual will himself draw about his own actions, because the actions are delivered from the taint of self-interested motivation.

Luther locates the source of all Christian righteousness in Jesus's command to believe in him (see John 6:28–29): "When we hear or preach this word, we hasten over it and deem it

¹⁴ LW 31:353.

¹⁵ Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 3.

¹⁶ LW 44:16.

¹⁷ Herdt, *Putting on Virtue*, 182.

¹⁸ M. G. Baylor, *Action and Person. Conscience in Late Scholasticism and the Young Luther* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 228.

a very little thing and easy to do, whereas we ought here to pause a long time and to ponder it well. For in this work all good works must be done and receive from it the inflow of their goodness, like a loan”¹⁹ Luther calls this faith in Christ “the first and highest” of all good works. Yet here he does not simply suggest that faith in Christ inaugurates in the Christian a newfound ability to do good works. Rather every good work is located in and receives its merit from this act of faith “like a loan.” Previously we saw that Luther understood the Christian as being freed from the law *for* good works. Here we see that this freedom for good works does not signify a shift in the believer’s natural capacity to do meritorious works, but a new availability for fulfilling the law in love by virtue of her being in Christ. Indeed, in Luther’s mind it may be the same outward actions that are undertaken, but the inward disposition, according to which they are done in faith, is that which transforms the works and makes them good. Thus, faith becomes for Luther the “criterion of every good work.”²⁰

Finally, the way in which these good works are manifest further helps us reconstruct Luther’s sense of how good works are willed. As we have seen, the nature of true righteousness precludes the possibility of the self as the “object” of good works; instead, they must be directed towards God and towards one’s neighbor. Both the *Treatise on Good Works* and the sermon *On the Three Kinds of Good Life* criticize preoccupation with the performance of religious works (those directed towards God) when such a preoccupation is a calculated attempt to garner spiritual advantage or favor for the one performing them. Luther otherwise takes for granted, however, that right worship of God is inherent in the fulfillment of the commandments in faith. Therefore, rather than focus on the ritual manifestation of good works, Luther instructs on the opportunity to serve one’s neighbor, having a conscience that before God is clean.

Good Works ... But for Whom?

Luther contrasts works that are done for one’s own benefit with the commandments of God that “drive us to our neighbor’s need, that by the means of these commandments we may be of benefit only to others and their salvation.”²¹ Concern for one’s neighbor becomes a recurring theme in the treatise. Faith creates a reality in which preoccupation with the self is

¹⁹ LW 44:2.

²⁰ Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 285.

²¹ LW 44:71.

not only illogical but also unimaginable: "For if faith does not doubt the favor of God, and a man has no doubt that he has a gracious God, it will be quite easy for him to be gracious and favorable to his neighbor."²² Similarly, he frames the freedom to serve one's neighbor in terms of selflessness while discussing the seventh commandment:

"Faith teaches this work of itself. If the heart expects and puts its trust in divine favor, how can a man be greedy and anxious? Such a man is absolutely certain that he is acceptable to God; therefore, he does not cling to money; he uses his money cheerfully for the benefit of his neighbor."²³

Faith, for Luther, frees the heart from being concerned with oneself and one's individual needs. As a result, the desire and will of the Christian naturally becomes for the neighbor.²⁴

As love for one's neighbor and desire for her well-being is not grounded in the worthiness of the recipient, the Christian does not undertake to judge her neighbor. Instead, as described by Baylor, in faith there is a new "power of the conscience to accept God's judgments about the person rather than those which the conscience arrives at naturally."²⁵ Just as faith removes the impediment of the will's subjective judgment from the self (freeing one from the compulsion to direct works to one's interests), so also faith removes the will's judgments of the neighbor (freeing one from the compulsion to withhold works that benefit the neighbor). Faith affecting the desire of the will to differentiate and decide in one's own interest thus removes any competitive drive that restricts the individual from willing according to God's command.

Luther describes this new, non-competitive way of living in Pauline language of "faith active in love" (see Galatians 5:6). "Here faith is truly active through love, that is, it finds expression in works of the freest service, cheerfully and lovingly done, with which a man willingly serves another without hope of reward; and for himself he is satisfied with the fullness and wealth of his faith."²⁶ Althaus explains the shift in the object of our good works succinctly, saying that "teleologically, our deeds are done not for God but for our neighbor and for him alone. Whatever we do, we are to concern ourselves only with our neighbor's needs and not worry about our own salvation."²⁷ As a result, the goal of a Christian's life

²² LW 44:108.

²³ LW 44:102.

²⁴ The Christian *desires* to do that for which she is *freed*.

²⁵ Baylor, *Action and Person*, 228.

²⁶ LW 31:365.

²⁷ Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, 5.

becomes entirely one of service to her neighbor.²⁸ In this way of living, the Christian imitates Christ's own selfless life, lived not for himself but for others. Such devotion to one's neighbor identifies a Christian, one who lives in faith. Luther writes as much in *The Freedom of a Christian*, describing a life compelled to share in Christ's mission:

"Just as our neighbor is in need and lacks that in which we abound, so we were in need before God and lacked his mercy. Hence, as our heavenly Father has in Christ freely come to our aid, we also ought freely to help our neighbor through our body and its works, and each one should become as it were a Christ to the other that we may be Christs to one another and Christ may be the same in all, that is, that we may be truly Christians."²⁹

Luther's *imitatio Christi* appears as more than simply an ethical mirroring of Christ's life. To be a Christian means not only being a "Christ" to one's neighbor but that in doing so Christ will be "the same in all." With this clause, Luther precludes any "respect of persons" among Christians in regard to the performance of good works. One cannot help his neighbor according to his own preferences, but only in the manner that Christ has. "He does not distinguish between friends and enemies or anticipate their thankfulness or unthankfulness, but he most freely and most willingly spends himself and all that he has, whether he wastes all on the thankless or whether he gains a reward."³⁰

For Luther preoccupation with the performance or the result of works goes against the rule of faith, which is defined by selfless orientation towards one's neighbor. Faith thus creates a reorientation of the moral center away from the concerns of the self and, in and through Christ, centers it in God. Christians "willingly" and "cheerfully" do good works because they are not judging actions according to their own interests. Rather the Christian wills to do good in an un-calculating way: spontaneously and out of love. Thus, the Christian is indeed both a perfectly free lord and a perfectly dutiful servant, but also a *selfless* servant, one who in faith is moved by that which moves Christ and not by the individual, peccable motivations.

²⁸ While his understanding of vocation is outside the scope of this project, it is necessary to note that Luther's writing on vocation engages in detail how faith manifests as love for one's neighbor in the Christian life. Significantly, Luther identifies all Christian vocation as being cruciform and an imitation of Christ, breaking down the medieval distinctions between religious and secular vocations in the process. See Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957).

²⁹ LW 31:367-68.

³⁰ LW 31:367.

In Luther's treatment of good works, we find a vision of a Christian whose motivations are transfigured by the new life of faith. There is a surrender of self-interest and an advent of blessed spontaneity that can be viewed as a proleptic experience of eschatological reality that is experienced as growth and progress.

In Luther's account, the spontaneity of willing that which is good is contrasted with the culpable motivations that, apart from faith, drive human beings to do good works (viz., seeking reward, either from God or from others, or avoiding punishment).³¹ We may briefly mention here the question of natural law without straying too far from our discussion of the will, inasmuch as for Luther this law, manifest both in creation and through revelation, "is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"³² Luther contends that even the love of self that fallen humans experience is an "inward reminder" of this commandment.³³ Thus the revealed law expands and explains what one knows naturally or intuitively.³⁴ Those who suppress this natural knowledge of God's law are described as people who "purposely stop their ears or pinch their eyes shut to close out sound and sight."³⁵ This describes a willfully diminished capacity to acknowledge that which God has not only explicitly commanded, but also endowed the creature with an innate (though now corrupted) desire for. Thus, one can say that for Luther disobeying God's law is unnatural.

Yet in his alternative to sinful desire to fulfill the demands of the law, Luther speaks of a willing that seemingly lacks any motivation, except that it is done gladly – because it is a "pleasure ... to please God."³⁶ This spontaneity suggests a type of ease indicative of a nature freed from the bondage incurred by the fall. In the *Treatise on Good Works*, Luther gives his clearest explanation of this. Having proposed that in faith the distinction between various types of works falls away (because, as we have seen, it is not the work itself, but the quality of its being done in faith that gives it merit), Luther uses the biblical examples of Saul, Hannah, and Paul to show that faith produces an effortless approach to works: "It further follows that a Christian who lives in this faith has no need of a teacher of good works, but

³¹ LW 44:242.

³² LW 27:349. Natural Law as its own category in Luther is more debated than what we have presented in its relationship to volition. See Robert C. Baker and Roland Cap Ehlke (eds.), *Natural Law: A Lutheran Reappraisal* (St Louis: Concordia, 2011).

³³ LW 27:351; "*Hoc autem exemplum intus sentitur.*" WA 2:577, 31.

³⁴ LW 40:98. Luther goes so far as to claim that "the natural laws were never so orderly and well written as by Moses."

³⁵ LW 19:54.

³⁶ LW 44:231-42; LW 44:6

whatever he find to do he does, and all is well done."³⁷ Luther supports this with an example of a loving human relationship. "When a man and a woman love and are pleased with each other, and thoroughly believe in their love, who teaches them how they are to behave, what they are to do, leave undone, say, not say, think? Confidence alone teaches them all this, and more."³⁸ Luther proposes that the Christian likewise is propelled purely out of their confidence in God. One neither needs to be taught how to act, nor to convince oneself of the benefit of one's actions. Faith makes good works once again natural to the human being.

Luther describes the life in Christ in ideal terms. Such expectation often runs counter to worldly experience. Although this idea remains unattained, this way of being is proleptically experienced inasmuch as the believer participates in it now. Even though she is in Christ, the Christian remains a sinner, such that by nature she cannot initiate good works of her own volition. She remains herself powerless to act contrary to her sinful nature. A Christian for Luther may grow and increase in good works that flow out of love, but these works will not necessarily look any different externally from those of the non-Christian, since it is the underlying faith and the transformed motivations that propel such external works that differentiate the Christian. Luther writes, "For although we have become a new creature, nevertheless the remnants of sin always remain in us."³⁹

This remnant of sin demonstrates the complexity of the new state of the Christian for Luther. It is certainly not the case that Luther eschews all talk of improvement in Christian life. He can say, for example, that "a Christian is not yet perfect, but he is a Christian who has, that is, who begins to have, the righteousness of God."⁴⁰ Likewise, in a sermon on 1 Peter, he contends that purification, though completed in glory, begins in this life: "It is characteristic of a Christian life to improve constantly and to become purer. When we come to faith through the preaching of the Gospel, we become pious and begin to be pure. But as long as we are still in the flesh, we can never become completely pure."⁴¹ We see that while Luther remains pessimistic about human capacity for improvement, he is not opposed to speaking of progress in faith, albeit cautiously. He is able to speak "moving and progressing towards

³⁷ LW 44:5.

³⁸ LW 44:6.

³⁹ LW 30:228.

⁴⁰ LW 17:224.

⁴¹ LW 30:17. These sermons on 1 Peter are somewhat early in Luther's career (1522), but nevertheless follow the *Heidelberg Disputation* and Luther's established views on the will and human capacity for good works.

[perfection] every day ... when the spirit is master over the flesh, holding it in check, subduing and restraining it, in order to not give it room to act contrary to this teaching."⁴²

Progress is possible for Luther because the conscience made clean by faith allows the believer to consider her neighbor differently and desire rightly. Such living responds to and upholds the rule of the spirit over the flesh, so that the point Luther has previously argued may be proven true: namely, that a Christian can "willingly serve another without hope of reward; and for himself he is satisfied with the fullness and wealth of his faith."⁴³ Because the key here is faith, there is "not much difference externally" between the Christian and a morally upright unbeliever.⁴⁴ Yet still the language of progress is clear: "This life, therefore, is not godliness, but the process of becoming godly, not health, but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way. The process is not yet finished, but it is actively going on."⁴⁵

As Luther primarily presents the new, selfless disposition of the will through faith as the logical conclusion of one's new life in Christ. Where he does attempt to provide more systematic division between stages of personal growth, these are given in a pastoral context to help the Christian reflect on what kind of conscience propels her works. In *On the Three Kinds of Good Life*, for example, he presents such a struggle as one in which the Christian grows from a false good life "concerned only outward works" to that of a well-developed conscience, to that kind of life characterized by self-denial and the Holy Spirit. The most important distinction for our purposes is that between the second and third kind of good life. In the former, one understands "humility, meekness, gentleness, [etc.]" but "set[s] about them in the wrong way."⁴⁶ Luther says that "God does not just want such works by themselves. He wants them performed gladly and willingly. And when there is no joy in doing them and the right will and motive are absent, then they are dead in God's eyes."⁴⁷ In the latter, the Holy Spirit "makes a pure, free, cheerful, glad, and loving heart, a heart which is

⁴² LW 21:129.

⁴³ LW 31:365.

⁴⁴ Christians hold the conviction that a tree can be known by the fruit it bears (Matthew 7:20) in tension with the subsequent revelation that not everyone who does deeds of power (or good) even in the name of Jesus is necessarily "known" by him (Matthew 7:22-23). That some do not bear good fruit will be obvious in this life. Yet whether even seemingly good fruit is born of a right heart and a selfless disposition is known only by God and invites us to self-examination.

⁴⁵ LW 32:24.

⁴⁶ LW 44:240.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

simply gratuitously righteous.”⁴⁸ The transition from the second kind of good life to the third is beyond human potential. The fallen human cannot will himself to be selfless. It is instead the result of the Spirit’s arrival and operation to make the heart so. Thus, the difference between the Pharisaic works of the first kind of good life and the flawed piety of the second kind is not external but in the inner quality of the works. The third kind of good life stands apart because its works are undertaken “seeking no reward, fearing no punishment.”⁴⁹ Luther’s belief that we must daily die and rise anew does not mean that we must always begin at the same place.⁵⁰ Rather the progress made is always one of a return to the third kind of good life in spite of whatever achievements one may have attained in the second kind.

Holy Living as Christic Living

In both Luther we see that the transformation that takes place in the believer can be understood as a surrendering of the self – particularly the self-preoccupation of the will. This surrender of the will to God makes the Christian available to participate in God’s own will and thus transforms the Christian’s efforts, overcoming the willful self-assertiveness that defines the fallen human’s relationship to their neighbor and to God. Luther frames what we understand as the rehabilitation of the will in terms of faith. Faith creates a clean conscience before God, freeing the Christian to willingly and gladly serve. In comparison, Chalcedon does not describe the healing as a response to faith; instead, it stresses the incarnation as its cause on account of the nature being assumed and divinized in Christ. It is as a result of the incarnation that the believer may cooperate with grace to surrender her particular desires so that they become increasingly changeless as they are rehabilitated to God’s own will.

The changes that occur as the will is transformed lead us to ask how these particular traits of the redeemed will (selflessness, virtuous desire, etc.) are communicated to the human being. This is an important question, because for Luther the will has in itself no capacity in itself be truly virtuous, and imputation of virtuous desire is the result of cooperation with grace.

⁴⁸ LW 44:241.

⁴⁹ LW 44:242.

⁵⁰ “*Qui incipient et non proficiunt, ponunt manum ad aratrum et respiciunt.*” WA 56:485, 28.

The joyful exchange (*commercium admirabile*, *fröhlich wechßel*) is not an uncommon theme in Luther's writings.⁵¹ The concept originates in Luther from Augustine's sermons via his mentor in the Augustinian friars, Johan von Staupitz. Augustine had written that "what is properly God's (namely, life) becomes man's; and what is proper to human nature (namely death) becomes God's."⁵² Burnell Eckardt and others have situated Luther's interest in the exchange in the medieval emphasis on Christ's death as vicarious satisfaction.⁵³ Whether this is the origin of its importance or not, Luther (following Staupitz) broadens the exchange into a nuptial metaphor. This transition is significant because it does not frame the exchange between Christ and believer in terms of strict transaction, as models of vicarious satisfaction or substitutionary atonement would imply. The nuptial metaphor emphasizes more the ongoing relationship and even tension between the two parties. As such it is not a saccharine or romanticized understanding of the relationship between Christ and the believer. Volker Leppin argues for the influence of medieval mysticism on not only Luther's use of nuptial metaphor but his entire theology of the cross.⁵⁴ It is in this intimacy of relationship that the true difference between partners becomes apparent. However, it is not merely a contrast of the mystic and her divine spouse, but of the Christian with Christ, and even of the "old Adam" and of Christ within her. While the relationship between the two partners is transformative, the bride does not become the groom, and vice-versa.

In a letter to Georg Spenlein (April 8, 1516) Luther writes, "Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness, just as I am your sin. You have taken upon yourself what is mine and given to me what is yours. You have taken upon yourself what you were not and have given to me what I was not."⁵⁵ This often-quoted prayer that Luther commends to Spenlein describes a certain transaction, but only subsequent to the assertion "you are my righteousness, just as I am your sin," so that any transactional exchange is predicated on a continuing context of relational dependence. In short, the Christian is not simply the beneficiary of grace transferred from Christ to her; such a commodification of grace is foreign to the reformer.

⁵¹ A *commercium admirabile* is described between Christ and creatures (WA 5:253, 10-11), and in exchanging human sin for Christ's righteousness (WA 5:608, 5-22), as well as a *feliciter commutans* (WA 40, 1:443, 23); and the phrase *fröhlich wechßel* is found in WA 7:25, 34.

⁵² David C. Steinmetz, *Luther and Staupitz: An Essay in the Intellectual Origins of the Protestant Reformation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1980), 29.

⁵³ Burnell Eckardt, *Anselm and Luther on the Atonement: Was It "Necessary"?* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992).

⁵⁴ Volker Leppin, *Die fremde Reformation. Luthers mystische Wurzeln* (München: C. H. Beck, 2016), 60–63.

⁵⁵ LW 48:12-13.

Rather, what defines the exchange between Christ and the believer (indeed, what makes it “happy”) is not simply that the believer benefits disproportionately, but that the exchange is a definite sign of the new relationship between the two. It is for this reason that the nuptial approach to this metaphor becomes so strongly developed in Luther’s thought.

In *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther distinguishes between three “benefits” of faith.⁵⁶ The first is identified as the “union” of the soul with the promise of God, which Luther illustrates by employing the classical patristic image of iron glowing like fire because of the union of fire with it.⁵⁷ The qualities of the God’s word (that is, what is promised by faith) are transferred to the soul by virtue of proximity like fire and iron.⁵⁸ The second is the “office” of faith which Luther calls “the very highest worship of God.”⁵⁹ Luther says that “we ascribe to him truthfulness, righteousness, and whatever else should be ascribed to one who is trusted.” Were the exchange to be understood in purely transactional terms, here we would see a clear imbalance. God provides faith, which enables right worship, and then rewards the effect of his gift: “Faith works truth and righteousness by giving God what belongs to him. Therefore God in turn glorifies our righteousness.”⁶⁰ The third benefit is that of the soul’s union with Christ, beyond that kind of union the soul was aid to have with the promise of God. Faith “unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom” (*quod animam copulat cum Christo, sicut sponsam cum sponso*).⁶¹ Here Luther explains how precisely relationship between the parties is the basis of exchange, providing also the foundation for the first two benefits he enumerated. The embrace of nuptial union as a metaphor concisely explains Luther’s understanding of the relationship. The two parties in a marriage become “one flesh” by their union – not only the nominal union of promise but the actualized union of their marital relations (hence *animam copulat*).

The nuptial metaphor points to the establishment of goods now shared in common that were once proper to separate parties. In their physical union a bride and bridegroom share themselves with one another in a way that transcends mere transaction. Thus, Luther establishes his model of exchange as one of intimacy and selflessness, according to the

⁵⁶ More appropriately rendered “graces of faith” (*gratiae fidei*), as “benefit” in English favors a purely transactional interpretation.

⁵⁷ LW 31:349.

⁵⁸ LW 31:349.

⁵⁹ LW 31:350.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ LW 31:351; WA 7:54, 31.

example of marriage.⁶² “Everything they have they hold in common, the good as well as the evil.”⁶³ In this understanding there is not *trade* of goods or services between the parties, but a *sharing* of all things among them. This sharing transforms the sharer so that the economy of the exchange is inseparable from the being of those involved. For Luther it would be a “fragile love” in which a husband did not give over control of everything that was his to his bride. Commenting on 1 John, Luther affirms this understanding of sharing between spouses as the substance of the happy exchange. “We share his good things; he shares our wretchedness. I believe in Christ. Therefore, my sin is in Christ.”⁶⁴ It is in this way that everything that Christ has can be claimed by the Christian.

Luther’s account of the joyful exchange is not devoid of struggle. Luther considers the “most pleasing vision” as encompassing both “a happy exchange *and struggle*.”⁶⁵ Luther continues the nuptial metaphor by addressing the impact of this exceptional union on the sinful human being experiencing it. For this reason, he doesn’t rely solely on the blissful side of the marriage metaphor, but on the struggle which once solely belonged to the sinner but which Christ now also shares “by the wedding-ring of faith.” Because the struggle with sin is now part of the common property between the sinner and Christ, Luther can call this a “blessed struggle” (*salutare bellum*) and “mighty duel” (*stupendum duellum*).⁶⁶ In her relationship to God, the Christian counts this struggle as completed because it is given up to Christ. *Coram Deo*, the union means the Christian is already free. In her outer person, however, she carries this struggle into her vocation and life of faith:

“Here the works begin; here a man cannot enjoy leisure; here he must indeed take care to discipline his body by fastings, watchings, labors, and other reasonable discipline and to subject it to the Spirit so that it will obey and conform to the inner man and faith and not revolt against faith and hinder the inner man, as it is the nature of the body to do if it is not held in check.”⁶⁷

In this way it is possible to conclude that Luther’s perspective is grounded in the Christological foundation exchange as a benefit of faith. This unity is applied metaphorically

⁶² The marriage of Christ and the soul is a “true marriage” (*verumque inter eos matrimonum*) which is approximated by the “feeble type” of human marriage. WA 7:54, 33f.

⁶³ LW 31:351.

⁶⁴ LW 30:225.

⁶⁵ “Frölich wechßel und streytt.” WA 7:25, 34.

⁶⁶ LW 31:351; WA 7:55, 8; LW 31:352; WA 7:55, 16.

⁶⁷ LW 31:358-9.

to the union of Christ and the soul: sharing all things, yet without confusion. This is demonstrated in the central Christological declaration of *The Freedom of a Christian*:

"Christ is God and man in one person. He has neither sinned nor died and is not condemned and he cannot sin, die, or be condemned; his righteousness, life, and salvation are unconquerable, eternal, omnipotent. By the wedding ring of faith he shares in the sins, death, and pains of hell which are his bride's. As a matter of fact, he makes them his own and acts as if they were his own and as if he himself had sinned he suffered, died, and descended into hell that he might overcome them all."⁶⁸

Luther understands the struggle as primarily that of Christ. It is this struggle that makes the inner person free, and only subsequently does the outer person struggle in faith. In his *Theses Concerning Faith and Law*, Luther writes, "True faith has as its end use of Christ's passion, life, and salvation."⁶⁹ Christian righteousness is for Luther passive, and the creation of the faith that unites one to Christ requires allowing him to work in us.⁷⁰ This is the essence of a Christian not living in himself but in God and his neighbor.

Some Conclusions

In observing Luther's constant return to Christology in matters of holiness we see that Christ's person is for him the very essence of how humans are made holy. The rehabilitation of the human is a consequence of faith and a manifestation of inseparable union with Christ establishes between God and human beings in his own person. Lutherans cannot have a weak doctrine of sanctification unless they believe that holiness is a human work. Something Luther would not claim. If God alone is in the business of making human beings holy, then it cannot be a weak work. Indeed, holiness is for Luther forged in the relationship of the human and the divine, a relationship which for him does not exist apart from Christ, and only through him.

Just as Luther shifts away from a medieval understanding of grace as a supernatural substance to one of understanding grace as a relationship, his conception of holiness correspondingly shifts. It is in this shift that we see not only a Christological, but specifically Chalcedonian vision. The substance of Christ is one of relationship between God and humanity. Such is also the substance of holiness. Holiness is the description of a relationship.

⁶⁸ LW 31:351-2.

⁶⁹ LW 34:110.

⁷⁰ "Ibi enim nihil operamur aut reddimus Deo, sed tantum recipimus et patimur alium operantem in nobis, scilicet Deum. Ideo libet illan fidei seu Christianam iustitiam appellare passivam." LW 26:4f.; WA 40/I:41.

Far from being a property to be attained and wielded by human beings, holiness cannot be properly spoken of apart from the union of the human with the Man who is God and Human.

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