

We Teach

Growing in Christ

Church of the **Lutheran Brethren**



The Doctrine of **Sanctification**



The Doctrine of Sanctification

Growing in Christ

sanc•ti•fi•ca•tion: the state of growing in God's grace.

It should be safe to assume that every Christian would like to grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ. When we come to a right relationship with God through faith in Christ (justification) we seek to grow in faith, becoming more and more like Jesus. That is what sanctification is all about.

The *Explanation of Luther's Small Catechism* presents a good description of sanctification: *"What is sanctification? Sanctification is the gracious work of the Holy Spirit by which he daily renews me more and more in the image of God through the Word and Sacraments."*

Sanctification is a work of God.

Many consider the Bible to be a book of principles which, when followed, can make one sanctified. Such thinking turns Christianity into merely another religion in which we strive to please God and earn his love. It is true that God works on, and in harmony with, our will. Paul the Apostle writes: "... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose" (Philippians 2:12b – 13). Though our will is involved and is worked on, it is still God who does the work. Because of our sinful nature, even though we are growing, the human will remains more of an obstacle to spiritual growth than a necessary force in our sanctification.

What does God use to sanctify us? How do we grow in Christ? He primarily uses the Word of God and the sacraments to deliver God's grace to us. He also uses people. It is important for us to be in ongoing fellowship with other believers as we study the Word, share in the gifts of grace (the sacraments) and seek to grow in faith.

If sanctification is God's work—and it is—then why does it seem that many Christians are not growing in faith?

There are various reasons. Some hinder God's work by not availing themselves of the means of grace. They ignore study of the Scriptures, neglect participation in worship of God, or dismiss the importance of partaking in communion regularly. If one resists God's work of grace in their life, sanctification will be hindered. Some resist dealing with sin, and so live in the guilt, bondage, and broken relationships that sin brings.

Sanctification involves a process of inner as well as outward change. Sanctification, spiritual growth, is a process. It takes time. Actually, it takes a lifetime. Some expect change to occur instantaneously and even find fault with new Christians when the effects of God's grace are not always clearly evident. But God patiently works in us a process of inward sensitivity and awareness of sin, resulting in outward change. This process is not always a steady climb toward the goal. We slip back and fall into sin, but God always forgives the repentant sinner, picks us up again and helps us to continue to move toward the goal of becoming more and more like Jesus Christ.

Sanctification is a process that affects our inner attitudes as well as our outward actions. Some think of sanctification, or growing in Christ, as keeping a list of do's and don'ts. This often leads to a narrow and critical spirit among Christians.

You might think that the Ten Commandments are do's and don'ts, but even these were written and given to us as descriptions of people of faith. While they do serve as standards for living, they also describe the way children of God live as they worship the One True God.

The Bible does speak and teach about proper attitudes and actions, including kindness, patience, love, concern, and forgiveness. The Bible teaches that Christian living involves watching what you say, caring for the needs of those less fortunate and being peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy, impartial, and sincere. Christian living means

living as free people and not using that freedom as a cover-up for evil, but rather showing respect for others, fearing and serving God, honoring those in authority, living in harmony with one another, being sympathetic and humble, and not repaying evil with evil, or insult with insult.

The change that comes with growth in Christ (sanctification) involves the renewal of the mind. The phrase in Romans 12:2, “be transformed,” teaches that transformation is something worked in us, not by us. It does not suggest a *try harder* mentality. Sanctification is characterized by believing that God accepts us through what Christ has done for us and living in a manner that is consistent with that belief. Our daily behavior is to be a result of this process of transformation. Most Christians want to do God’s will even when they have difficulty doing it.

Merely trying harder will not result in inner change or true spiritual growth. We need to allow God’s grace to bear fruit in our lives. This will definitely change us and make us more Christ-like. While the results of this growth and change may be subtle, it will become more clearly evident as we continue to live in Christ. Paul the Apostle states: “...your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory” (Colossians 3:3b – 4).

Sanctification must always remain separate from, but still connected to, justification. Justification and sanctification must always remain separate from each other or we might conclude our progress in sanctification determines our standing before God. If we focus on our track record in any given week, we will never make much progress. If we can’t rid ourselves of sin as easily as we once thought, we might be tempted to think we are not committed enough, or we haven’t completely turned our lives over to Christ, or our conversion wasn’t good enough, or maybe we never decided for Jesus in the first place. Such thinking will only hinder our progress in sanctification. We need to remember that

justification establishes and maintains our relationship with God; sanctification, growing in faith, follows.

We must also know that each Christian has two natures: the old sinful nature and the new nature God gives us when we are born again. These two natures war within us. Our salvation does not depend upon which nature may be having the upper hand at any given moment. Our salvation always rests upon the saving work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Our sanctification, our growth in Jesus Christ, continues as he works his will in our lives.

Martin Luther, the great reformer and founder of the Lutheran church, emphasized that the more external the foundation of salvation (not our work but God's work), the more internal were its results. To the very degree that the objective promises of God in Christ are stressed, the subjective fruits of the gospel increase in the Christian life.

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Conclusion:

In the Christian life, sanctification is an ongoing process of growth. We are becoming more Christ-like, but no one will be completely finished, completely sanctified, this side of heaven. Luther said, “Christians are both sinners and saints.” It will always be God’s grace, not our striving, that causes us to be accepted by God. It will always be God’s grace that enables us to become more Christ-like as we grow in faith.

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Explanation of Luther’s Small Catechism

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