

Holiness and the Cure of Souls

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WHILE JUSTIFICATION ALWAYS REMAINS the central article of the Christian faith, pastoral work is carried out routinely in the realm of sanctification. That is, the preaching of the cross always remains at the center. This—and this alone—constitutes the gospel: the gracious pronouncement that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not counting their sins against them. Indeed, Christ Jesus is the redeeming sacrifice for us all. By his death on the cross he accomplishes a “glad exchange.” Absorbing into himself all our iniquity, he bestows his own perfect righteousness to all who trust in him. Now when God looks at the believing Christian he no longer sees a sinner, but his own beloved Son in whom he is well pleased. Justification is the heart of the matter.

Yet for as long as believers remain in this world, sin continues to unleash its devastation. We daily sin much and indeed deserve nothing but God’s wrath and punishment; we remain guilty as charged before the unbending standard of his holy law. But there is another equally devastating dimension of sin besides guilt, and that is shame. Besides sinning against other people, at the same time we are regularly sinned against by others. Thus we also routinely struggle with shame and a deep sense of defilement and unworthiness before a holy God.

Either way one looks at it—whether it be guilt or shame—people are daily polluted and defiled before God. They need spiritual cleansing. And that is where pastoral care comes in. In preaching, most surely, but also in all other pastoral acts people are continually cleansed from their own sin and the defilement of sins others have committed against them. They receive a good conscience before God as they are ushered into God’s presence through the means of the Holy Spirit—his gospel and sacraments. To be more precise: they are being sanctified by God the Holy Spirit through his means. The very same power is at work on the Lord’s Day in a pastor’s preaching, baptizing, and communing as in all the teaching, consoling, absolving, praying, and blessing he does the rest of the week. Personal charm or a pastor’s dynamic personality cannot release sin’s guilt or cleanse sin’s shame; only the presence and power of the Holy Spirit working through his inspired word

can do these things. Pastors are men on a mission. They are under orders as Christ’s servant to speak his word tailored for each particular circumstance. And that word of Christ is potent, for his words are Spirit and life.

In all their work, then, pastors are nothing more—and nothing less—than emissaries of Jesus Christ. They are sent to do his bidding and to speak the word he gives them to speak. As they faithfully speak his Spirit-filled word, the Holy Spirit himself will be at work calling, gathering, and sanctifying for himself a holy people called out of darkness to live as lights in this dark and dying world.

WHAT DOES HOLY MEAN?

Holiness, then, is the realm in which pastors work day in and day out as physicians of souls. But what really is holiness? Better yet, what do we mean by *holy*? Here is a word found all over Scripture and a word repeatedly used in the historic liturgy and Christian hymnody, and yet its meaning remains elusive. I think that is because we keep thinking of it in descriptive terms, when it is actually more definitive than descriptive. True, it is used in the Bible as an adjective, as in “holy people” or “holy things.” But before it functions descriptively, it works definitively. For example, in Leviticus 19:2, the Lord God instructs Moses that the foundation of all of Israel’s worship and life is fundamentally rooted in the person of God himself: “Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, ‘You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.’” This is both command and promise. What God requires, he also gives. Holiness is not only demanded, but provided. In other words, only God is intrinsically holy in himself. All other things and persons in this world have a derived holiness. Yet in his gracious condescension, God shares his holiness with his people.

One cannot really define holiness. That is because holiness belongs to the very essence of God. So holiness does not merely describe him, but defines him. Before *holy* is an adjective, it is a noun. This may be a new way of thinking for some; I know it was for me. But this is the way the Scriptures speak. The Lord God is the Holy One of Israel: “[T]he LORD our God is holy” (Ps 99:9). The unclean demon cringed in fear of the Lord Jesus: “I know who you are: the Holy One of God” (Luke 4:34). Scripture portrays God as utter holiness in his very being. Wherever God is, there holiness is located. One will search in vain in the Bible for a definition of God’s holiness, and this is by design. The holiness of God is not just another one of his attributes, such as “all-powerful” or “all-knowing” or “present every-

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where.” Nor can God’s holiness be understood by way of analogy in comparison to human attributes, such as “without sin” or “transcendently pure.” No, the holiness of God involves his very being as God. Holiness is not descriptive of his essence; it is his essence. Holiness is what sets God apart from all of his creation, including humans. You might say that God’s holiness is his “god-ness,” his divinity.

SET APART

In his famous “Gettysburg Address,” President Abraham Lincoln reminded a sorrowing nation “[W]e can not dedicate, we can not consecrate, we can not hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract.”¹ The familiar cadence of these solemn words continues to resonate in contemporary ears, yet the language of holiness in which they are couched is a foreign tongue for most today. Sadly, even Christians have lost touch with the language of holiness (for example, its verbal form *hallow* above) and the idea of the holy or the concept of consecration (making sacred). Yet here in this thoroughly secular setting, not all that long ago historically speaking, a beloved American president reminded those gathered for the dedication of a military cemetery that the ground on which they were assembled had already been hallowed. It was consecrated by the blood of the men of the Blue and Grey who gave their lives in the horrific carnage of that historic battle.

Lincoln’s eloquent words are rooted in the language of Holy Scripture. What was spoken there at Gettysburg on that hallowed battlefield lends vivid credence to our own experience of sanctification. We cannot dedicate (that is, set apart) or consecrate or hallow (sanctify) ourselves or anything else. We can only acknowledge or maintain the holiness already present. The blood of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, not only cleanses us from sin, but consecrates us to live under him in his kingdom to be sanctified by his Holy (that is, sanctifying) Spirit as we draw holiness from him in public worship and by personal meditation on the word and prayer.

We are set apart, in other words, by God and not by our own will power. Sanctification is not a project, but a gift. As we cannot by our own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ our Lord, or even come to him, so also we can never sanctify ourselves by improving ourselves morally. Sanctification is not our private do-it-yourself self-improvement project. True, the human will plays a part. We cooperate with God’s will. Yet the renewed will is not of our own making. First, last, and always, God himself is at work equipping Christians with everything good that they may do his will, working in them that which is well pleasing to him (Heb 13:21).

POWER AND PRESENCE

If we read the Scriptures carefully, we see that the holiness of God is never defined abstractly or by way of metaphor or anal-

ogy. Rather God’s holiness, wherever it shows up in the Bible, is experienced as a power and a presence—the power and presence of God himself. Thus the holiness of God is somewhat like light or fire, which simultaneously both attracts and repels, depending on the circumstances. They are dangerous in one way, but life-giving and enriching in another. The sun gives life and light to all creation, for example, but it blinds anyone looking directly into its searing beams and scorches and annihilates anything that approaches it. So also fire gives off heat to warm and enliven, but it also consumes anything combustible.

The Lord’s holiness provided life and vitality to Israel, but also destroyed anyone who desecrated it. The sad story of Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu is recorded in Leviticus 10:3. They offered unauthorized sacrificial fire before the Lord’s presence within the holy tabernacle, and the Lord’s fire came out from his presence and consumed them. Yet at the same time, the Lord sanctifies his people by means of his holy name. By that sacred name they are sanctified and God shares his holiness with them: “I am the LORD who sanctifies you, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I am the LORD” (Lev 22:32–33).

GOD OUR SANCTIFICATION

The Lord God alone remains our sanctification. The wonder is that he shares his holiness with us by means of his name and his word (Ps 138:2). All things may thus be sanctified by the word of God and prayer (1 Tim 4:4–5). In other words, we cannot make anything holy, including ourselves. Like Lincoln at Gettysburg, we cannot hallow what has already been hallowed. Rather, we maintain the holiness God gives his people by faith. Using the means of his sacred word and holy sacraments, we are called upon to keep holy what God has made holy, including ourselves. This is the rich theology of holiness that shapes and enlivens the life of the baptized, as Dr. Luther teaches in the Small Catechism:

The Third Commandment

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.

What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and his Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it. (SC I, 5–6)

The First Petition

Hallowed be Thy name.

What does this mean? God’s name is certainly holy in itself, but we pray in this petition that it may be kept holy among us also.

How is God’s name kept holy? God’s name is kept holy when the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity, and we, as the children of God, also lead holy lives according to it. Help us to do this, dear Father in heaven! But anyone who teaches or lives contrary to God’s Word profanes the name of God among us. Protect us from this, heavenly Father! (SC III, 3–5)

1. Abraham Lincoln, “Gettysburg Address,” in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953–1955), 7:22–23.

SANCTIFIED BODIES

In order to see how this transformational understanding of sanctification works in the care of souls, let us select the Sixth Commandment as an example, “You shall not commit adultery.” Not that sexual sin is the most grievous, but if we are to believe Scripture, it is the most defiling spiritually speaking, and the most degrading subjectively speaking. All other sins are committed outside the body by word or thought or deed, but this sin involves the body most intimately and personally. It is no surprise, then, that sexual sin leaves a lot of damage in its wake, not only psychologically and emotionally, but spiritually as well. When a Christian indulges in sexual sin, he defiles and desecrates his body, which is God’s holy temple. As St. Paul writes, “Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God?” (1 Cor 6:19).

This is no small matter. The Western world is sinking into a sexual quagmire that rivals the pervasive sexual decadence of the ancient pagan world. The sexual revolution of the ’60s has toppled the sexual standards of previous generations and has become the new norm in contemporary culture. Sex is now nearly completely severed from procreation and has become entertainment—a recreational sport, both participatory and spectator. Marriage is despised and redefined. In an age of gender fluidity, sexual identity is divorced from human anatomy. A wide spectrum of self-constructed “genders” replaces the biological binary sexes. Homoerotic liaisons are legitimized and even prized. Virginity is despised and chastity is ridiculed. Sexual promiscuity of every sort is expected and admired. Thanks to the worldwide Internet, pornography addiction has become pandemic, to the extent that many otherwise healthy young men find themselves incapable of normal sexual function.²

THE PASTORAL CHALLENGE

In such a sexual cesspool, spiritual physicians have their work cut out for them. How are we to navigate this rising tide of decadence? How are we to provide care and cure for souls wounded and broken by sexual sin—both the sins they commit and the sins committed against them? How are we to minister to the women and men who have been victimized, shamed, and defiled by sexual assault and abuse? How are we to bring healing to the broken souls who have indulged in illicit sex and now stagger under a seemingly insurmountable mountain of guilt, hurt, remorse, revulsion, and shame regarding their own bodies?

A vibrant proclamation of rich forgiveness and grace in Jesus Christ is clearly essential. Such broken and contrite hearts crave the forgiveness that Jesus freely gives through his called servants; justification is the central cure. But to recover from

the collateral damage of sexual sin, these souls also need sanctification. Yet always remember this: sanctification does not come by means of the law. True, the commands of God are not burdensome to forgiven sinners renewed in Christ Jesus (1 John 5:3). And most certainly the moral standards of God’s law need to be taught and preached vigorously and without apology, especially in our immoral and promiscuous times. This is no time to let up on God’s law, for these are lawless times. Yet the law of God, though it can and does teach us the way of holiness, can never bring us holiness.

DÉJÀ VU ALL OVER AGAIN: A PAGAN RESURGENCE

As mentioned above, sexual sin is nothing new. The first Christians lived in a culture drenched in sexual decadence of all variations. That stands to reason, for paganism inevitably entails a life of unrestrained hedonism. The relentless pursuit of pleasures of every sort means that sexual indulgence inescapably becomes a way of life. What goes around comes around, it seems; what is old is new again in terms of sexuality. Late modernity resembles late antiquity in its sexual mores. The Western world, for long centuries shaped and influenced by Christian teaching, is reverting to its pagan roots. We see the results around us everywhere in rapidly unravelling moral standards and a pervasive tsunami of sexual decadence and debauchery.

As physicians of the soul, pastors need to remember that this sexual disaster is not the core problem. It is only a symptom; the real quandary we are in is not primarily moral, but spiritual. You cannot straighten out this mess just by launching a moral improvement campaign. Nor can you heal broken and wounded souls who suffer the consequences of bodies defiled with sexual sin by means of the law, as if these poor sinners could by their own reason and strength make themselves more holy. No, God alone is holy and he himself is our sanctification.

A SEXUAL CASE STUDY

To get our head around how this works pastorally in the twenty-first century, let us explore a case study from the first century. There are many parallels between the world of ancient antiquity and our own world of late modernity; both are environments mostly devoid of Christian morality. It is highly instructive for us as contemporary *Seelsorgers*, then, to see how St. Paul taught first-century Christian men to maintain their holiness amid the defilement of a sexual cesspool of perversions and decadence very much like our own:

Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your *sanctification*: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in *holiness* and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an

2. Neil Osterweil, “Porn Use Linked to Erectile Dysfunction,” American Urological Association 2017 Annual Meeting, <https://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/879982>.

avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God has not called us for impurity, but in *holiness*. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his *Holy Spirit* to you. (1 Thess 4:1–8)

I have italicized four words in this passage. In the original text all four words are cognates of *hagiasmos* (holiness). The first three words are the exact same noun, and the last is an adjective with the same root as the noun. This means that our English words *sanctification* and *holiness* are exactly the same word in New Testament Greek. The implications are striking for any Christian man struggling to maintain sexual purity in a depraved world. And they are absolutely transformational for any pastor who seeks to provide faithful soul care in our sexually indulgent climate. As we look at this case study from the pen of the apostle written to real flesh-and-blood men, like those whom pastors shepherd every day, six things should be noted:

1. *We need to work at improvement in Christian living*, “as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more” (1 Thess 4:1). Where there is faith, there is love. And that love is always expanding. This is common in any genuinely loving relationship. Love is never static. For example, one might say to one’s wife, “I love you more today than yesterday but less than tomorrow.” Friendships likewise deepen and expand over time through mutual joys and tribulations shared. In the same way, the Christian continually grows outside of himself to live increasingly by faith in God and by love for his neighbor. Faith lives by love, in other words. So wherever faith increases, love grows too.

Thus pastors will urge their men to please God more and more in their behavior, being careful to ground that growth in Christ, not in the unaided human will. For the sinful mind is always at war with God (Rom 8:7). Paul the pastor stresses that his exhorting and urging toward sexual chastity is “in the Lord Jesus.” In other words, the Christian life always remains rooted in Holy Baptism, as noted above. Christian virtue flows from baptism into Christ. As we live in him, so he lives in us. Manly sexual virtue is accomplished not just by imitation of Christ, but by baptism into him. Thus Christ with all his virtues takes shape in bodily life by the daily cycle of death and resurrection. Each day the lusts and desires of the sinful flesh are drowned and die by contrition and repentance and a new man continually emerges to live before God in righteousness and true holiness. And that emerging new man looks very much like Jesus. No wonder, then, that there is an implied progress in moral living in a Christian’s life.

2. *Yet sanctification is never equated with moral improvement*. God alone always remains our sanctification, “[f]or this is the will of God, [who is] your sanctification” (1 Thess 4:3). We are called to be holy, yet we can only become holy and maintain our holiness as we share in God’s holiness by participation in his divine life. He does not expect us, nor are we able, to come up with our own sanctification by working harder at it.

We cannot by our own reason or strength believe, nor can we sanctify ourselves by human reason or strength. God himself is our sanctification. All holiness comes from him.

Sanctification is not a personal project, but a gift of the Holy Spirit. And it is an ongoing gift. Our moral track record goes up and down. Good works present a checkered pattern in a Christian’s life, always mingled with sin. Because of the sinful nature within us, the good we want to do we do not do, and the evil we do not want to do is what we do (Rom 7:19). Good works are the result, not the cause, of sanctification. Our works of love and faith flow from sanctification, but sanctity itself is God’s gift. The life we live in these bodies of ours we live by faith in Christ, daily drawing on his transforming power. He, the Holy One, remains the inexhaustible source of true holiness.

3. *Chastity is therefore an acquired virtue*. Men can never gain control over their sexual appetite or maintain sexual purity by their own willpower. Neither can women, for that matter. But St. Paul was clearly referring explicitly to males in this instance, “that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor” (1 Thess 4:4). The original word for *body* in this verse is more literally translated as *vessel*. While scholars debate its precise meaning here, that specific word was used widely in the ancient Greek-speaking world for the penis.

So here we have Paul the *Seelsorger* speaking bluntly and quite frankly to Christian men about how they use their sexual organs. The habits and sexual mores of their pagan brothers should not determine how they live sexually, he instructs them.

In his wisdom God created men and women with strong sexual desire. It was his way of ensuring bodily union within marriage and the resulting procreation and ongoing nurture of children. The male sex drive is an especially potent force. Paradoxically, its immense power can be used constructively or destructively. Like the irresistible current of a vast river, it can be channeled for great good or, spilling over its banks, it can destroy everything in its path. This was the widespread condition among pagan men in the sexual degeneracy of ancient Thessalonica. “Gentiles who do not know God” give free reign to their libido, St. Paul writes.

Of course; how could it be otherwise? Post Eden, the great positive potency of the male sex drive wreaks great havoc wherever it flows unchecked out of its naturally created marital boundaries. Like a great river in flood stage, it then engulfs and consumes everything in its path. Sex “gone wild” decimates and destroys. Decadence had been unleashed among many men in Thessalonica. Raw animal appetite drove these pagans to indulge their sex drives freely. Sexually, they were incontinent; their urges went unbridled. They ravenously used their organs in “the passion of lust.” In other words, they did whatever felt good.

THE CHRISTIAN DIFFERENCE

But there is a dramatic difference between Christians and pagans, the apostle reminded his readers, especially in their sexuality. Christian men are certainly no less manly than unbelieving men; the distinction is that they know the Lord Jesus.

In a very real sense their bodies are not their own. Their bodies, including their genitalia, were first purchased and cleansed by the blood of Christ. Then in Holy Baptism their bodies were sanctified as temples by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. This means all their bodily parts are quite literally members of Christ, managed under his control and direction. Sanctified and guided by Christ, the male libido is thus harnessed and redirected for the glory of God and the good of others — in conjugal relations with their wives and, contained and redirected, empowering fraternal relationships with their brothers and sisters in Christ's church and the welfare of their neighbors.

It is common to think of Jesus as a sexless human. Yet he is a man's man in every way. Incarnate in male flesh, Scripture teaches that he was tempted in every way just as we are, yet without sin (Heb 4:15). That means that though he remained sexually abstinent, he knows the tug of every man's sexual temptation. We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with us in our weakness. This explodes the myth that chastity is not only improbable, but also impossible for virile men.

VIRILITY AND VIRTUE

Virtue and virility have the same Latin root: *vir* means man. To be genuinely manly and virile involves more than musculature, hormones, and sexual prowess; it means to be virtuous by baptism into Christ, exhibiting Christ-like baptismal virtue. The truly masculine traits of courage, honor, and strength are used for others rather than selfish pursuits. Likewise the manly virtue of sexual chastity: it empowers both abstinence apart from marriage and faithfulness within it.

By baptismal union with Christ Jesus, men increasingly learn how to direct their sexuality and control their genitals "in holiness and honor." However, that holiness is not dredged up from within. Such holiness is always "in the Lord Jesus," that is, sexual sanctity is derived by continual connection to God who is holiness himself. That changes things. By the holiness God provides, a man is no longer enslaved to lustful passions. Now he is a free man, set at liberty to serve God and his neighbor in every way, including his sexuality, in abstinence if single, and in faithfulness to his bride if married. Thus the noble power and energy of his virility becomes a potent force for good. Like a great dynamo generating electricity to power thousands of households, the Christian's sanctified sexual energy directs his whole life to the glory of God and the common good of mankind rather than self-indulgent erotic gratification.

4. *Sex is a public issue*, "that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter" (1 Thess 4:6). In our sexually decadent society, this sounds like heresy. In our world, every individual is a free agent when it comes to sex. Whatever sexual indulgence he or she engages in is perfectly fine, so long as it is mutually agreeable in the case of two (or more) individuals. Strangely, though sexual acts of all sorts are brazenly and openly displayed in media and public entertainment, there is an almost puritanical obsession with "privacy" when it comes to sexual experiences. Most men think their sexual obsessions and proclivities are a matter of both individual choice and per-

sonal privacy. Since it is my body, I can do whatever I want with it and moral limits do not apply; I should be permitted to do anything I feel like doing sexually.

A BAND OF BROTHERS

St. Paul, in contrast, sets private sexual acts within the public life of the church and the fraternal bond of brothers in Christ. He writes, "No one [should] transgress and wrong his brother in this matter" (1 Thess 4:6). Within the Christian church what men do sexually with their bodies reflects on the whole church, which collectively is the body of Christ in this world. A Christian's sexual sin defiles his brother's honor as well as his own. Fornication is not merely a sin against God and his sexual partner, but against the brother with whom he is united in holiness.

Conversely, each man's chastity builds up his brother's. By living a sexually pure and decent life, he encourages his brother in sexual fidelity as a husband if married or in sexual abstinence if he is single. Holiness is catching, it seems. Borrowing his holiness from God, who is our sanctification, each man's holiness encourages and edifies his brother toward greater sexual faithfulness and purity.

5. *Holiness (sanctification) is a gift of the Holy (sanctifying) Spirit*, "God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you" (1 Thess 4:7–8).

Far from a mere moral infraction, sexual sin defiles and pollutes a person spiritually. St. Paul urges these men "in the Lord Jesus" to offer their bodies to God for his service. In a decadent, debauched world of promiscuous sexual license, Christian men are called to sexual purity, which includes abstinence apart from marriage and faithfulness within it. However, if a Christian man mimics his pagan neighbors by indulging his passions and living a promiscuous life as they do, not only does he sin against God, but he also defiles and desecrates the entire body of Christ, especially the Christian brotherhood.

Thank God there is forgiveness for penitent sinners. Turning in contrition and repentance to Christ, there is forgiveness and restoration in his shed blood also for sexual sin. In their ministry as spiritual physicians, pastors will remember to bring broken and contrite hearts absolution and cleansing by the blood of Jesus. But having desecrated the honor of his Christian brothers by sexual sin, a penitent who sins sexually needs more than simply to be forgiven and cleansed through the righteousness of Jesus. He needs covering for his shame and the restoration of his honor through the holiness of Jesus as well. Sexual sanctification is always a work in process; it is an ongoing gift of the Holy Spirit in Christ Jesus.

6. *Thus there is more at stake in sexual issues than "values" or mere morality*, "[f]or God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness" (1 Thess 4:7).

Baptismal virtue is at the heart of the matter. It is a matter of defilement and desecration versus holiness. It is a question of sanctification, in other words. As Seelsorgers, pastors are not moral policemen or sexual traffic cops. Rather they are genuine

physicians for souls; embodied souls, to be sure, but souls nonetheless. When caring for souls in sexual matters they need to take into consideration not merely guilt, but the whole dimension of spiritual defilement, purification, and sanctification.

CLEAN AND HOLY

This case study in sexual soul care from ancient Thessalonica translates well into our own hypersexualized world. Sexual promiscuity always contaminates and defiles a person before God. Christian men (and women) have not been called to impurity, but in holiness, as St. Paul reminds them.

The question is, where does that holiness come from? As we have seen, this passage clearly teaches that holiness is always a gift of God, not a work of man. Clearly in this lawless world of ours, rapidly sinking ever deeper into flagrant crass paganism, pastors need to teach explicitly and directly what it means to live according to God's will and commandments. Yet such knowledge of God's law alone does not have the power to change human hearts. Only God himself can do that by his Spirit.

Once more, for good measure: sanctification is not a project, let alone a do-it-yourself project. Sanctification is rather the gift given by God's Holy Spirit through his divinely appointed means: the word of God preached and his sacraments administered. These are the sacred channels of the Holy Spirit's cleansing and sanctifying power. By these sacred means people are not only forgiven of all their sins; they also participate and share in the very holiness of God, "who gives his Holy Spirit to you" (1 Thess 4:8).

PHYSICIANS OF SEXUAL SOULS

Pastors have the high privilege and calling of being servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. They are in a real sense errand boys for Jesus. He sends them out every day on his vital mission: to bring the Holy Spirit with all his gifts to suffering and wounded souls by the word they preach and the sacraments they administer. All sins, though equally condemning, are not equally defiling. Amid the wreckage left in the wake of the sexual revolution, pastors need to be keenly aware that sins of the body defile and contaminate the body, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit. They profane the holiness of God, placing the Christian in grave spiritual jeopardy.

St. Paul writes, "Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Cor 6:18–20). Yet even the toxic mental havoc and spiritual contamination of sexual sin can be erased, not just eradicated in the forgiveness of sins and the righteousness of Christ, but also healed and made whole by his holiness as well. Thus the discerning physician of souls intentionally applies both: the righteousness of Christ to convey forgiveness and cleansing to broken and contrite souls, and his own holiness as well to bring sanctification and wholeness to desecrated and wounded souls.

DYING TO LIVE

Pastoral care in the face of the devastation of sin involves ongoing baptismal therapy; suffering souls are led to daily repentance, which involves both death and life, being killed and being raised again. Repentance comprises a genuine turning and renewal in mind and heart, which leads to a new life in Christ. By contrition and repentance the old Adam in these souls is put to death and they are raised up each day renewed in the spirit of their minds to put on the new man created after the image of God not only in righteousness, but true holiness as well (Eph 4:23–24). Obviously, then, both law and gospel are at the heart of baptismal therapy.

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God's law serves three essential functions: it prescribes, it proscribes, and it describes. We need the instruction and prescription of the law to know what pleases God. Especially as human culture grows ever more pagan, the clear and consistent teaching of the law of God is more important than ever. People need direction; they need to know how to live lives that are pleasing to God instead of simply conforming to the increasingly decadent world around them. "[T]he law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good" (Rom 7:12).

Likewise God's law proscribes; that is, it forbids. Without the commandments of God, there would be no barriers to the sinful inclinations and obsessions of the fallen human heart. And that would be a pretty scary situation, for Jesus warned that out of the heart come all kinds of mischief and mayhem; not just adultery and all kinds of perverse sexual sin, but also lies, slander, theft, and murder, all originating in evil thoughts that flow unchecked from the human heart ever since Eden (Matt 15:19). So when the law proscribes, it also serves society as a protecting wall against public mayhem.

Finally, the law of God also describes what the new life in Christ looks like: "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Cor 13:4–7). Thus for the Christian, the commandments of God are not burdensome (1 John 5:3). God's law indeed describes the new life in Christ. The mind set on the fallen flesh is in rebellion against God: "[I]t does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot" (Rom 8:7). But the mind made new in Christ delights in the law of God and always strives to please him: "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through

his Spirit who dwells in you” (Rom 8:11). Thus we see how baptism is pivotal: it is the hinge on which the Christian life depends, the door to ongoing renewal and repentance all life long. Martin Luther eloquently summarizes the ongoing impact of baptism into Christ: “Therefore every Christian has enough in Baptism to learn and to practice all his life; for he has always enough to do to believe firmly what it promises and brings: victory over the devil, forgiveness of sin, the grace of God, the entire Christ, and the Holy Ghost with his gifts” (LC IV, 41).

Sinners who have been plunged into Christ’s saving death and resurrection by baptism into him are freed from bondage to sin to live in freedom as the sons and daughters of God. They no longer live for themselves but for the Lord who bought them with his blood and set them free to live before God in righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. Indeed, for them the old way of life is gone and the new has come. It is just as the apostle wrote, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20).

With the above three functions of God’s law in view, we can see how God the Holy Spirit therefore uses his law, not just to curb the destructive impact of sin in the world, but also as a mirror to show us our sin, and then finally as a guide to show us how to live. Certainly the law of God is good and wise and true; “the law is spiritual,” writes St. Paul. But I am not. “I am of the flesh,” he continues (Rom 7:14). And that is the problem. As long as we are in this world, people are plagued with the ceaseless compulsions of their sinful minds; though we set out to do the right thing and please God, we end up falling right back into sin again.

COMPASSIONATE CARE

Therefore, if you are a pastor, have some compassion on the sinners you work with in Jesus’ name. You should be able to empathize with them, after all. For just like you, they are continually hounded by the urges of a sin-obsessed mind. When they set out to do the right thing, they end up doing the wrong thing. The good things they want to do, they do not do; instead, they end up doing the evil things they wanted to avoid (Rom 7:19). So do not try to reform them. You can never tame the sinful nature. Sin cannot be reformed; it has to be killed. Daily, sin must die so that the new man can arise and live again. And that in a nutshell is what baptismal therapy is all about: applying both law and gospel to lead sinners into ongoing repentance, that is, genuine change and renewal in Christ Jesus.

THE RIGHT PRESCRIPTION

One caveat: for all its benefits and blessings, the law of God should never be used to motivate or empower the Christian life. Recovering sin addicts, like all addicts, certainly need instruction. Yet knowing what to do and doing it are two different things. Recovery happens one day at a time, putting sin to death by contrition and repentance so that the new man in Christ can daily emerge and arise to live in righteousness and purity. That is baptismal therapy at work. And that is the treat-

ment you need to prescribe as a doctor of souls, especially in these lawless days.

It is pastoral malpractice to prescribe the law to penitent sinners as the source of a God-pleasing life. The law directs and guides, but it cannot motivate or empower. The only legitimate motivation for the life of faith is not the law, but the gospel: the good news that God was in Christ reconciling the whole world unto himself, not charging their sins against them, but against his own sinless Son. Putting sin to death by his sacrificial suffering, death, and resurrection, Jesus has opened the kingdom of heaven to all who trust in him. By baptism he has joined himself to them and them to him; he lives in them as they live in him. The life they live in the flesh they live by faith in the Son of God who loved them and gave himself for them (Gal 2:20).

Sinners need to go on dying and rising in Christ every day of their lives. Repentance is the key, and it is worked by God himself, by means of both his law and gospel, properly distinguished and applied. And that is where the pastor comes in; this too is part and parcel of the pastoral habitus. The art of the right distinction and application of law and gospel is a skill pastors never master, but continually acquire in the school of experience as they minister to both proud and arrogant sinners, and broken and contrite sinners, with the goal that they might serve God with a clean and free conscience in Christ Jesus.

CARING FOR SEXUAL SOULS

It is utterly crucial that when dealing with sexual sin pastors keep this baptismal therapy uppermost in mind and heart. For daily dying and rising is the ongoing hinge to the new life in Christ, also in this most intimate dimension of human experience. The sexual drive is a force to be reckoned with; God himself designed sex to be a powerful force for good. Yet like the proverbial Humpty Dumpty, sex has experienced a great fall. Humanly speaking, it cannot be restored to its good and holy purpose in God’s pristine creation. Sadly, contaminated by sin it has become a destructive compulsion polluting the soul and potentially harming other people. Yet what is impossible with man is possible with God. What the human will cannot control, God can re-create and restore. In his letter to the Galatian Christians St. Paul unpacks how daily sanctification by the Spirit contains and redirects destructive sexual impulses for good: “Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires (Gal 5:19–24).

VICE AND VIRTUE IN THE CARE OF SOULS

Physicians of souls should take note of the proper use of vice and virtue. In this text the apostle does not prescribe godly virtues as the antidote for sexual vice as though somehow each

sexual sin can be negated and countered with a corresponding sexual virtue. Rather, vices and virtues collectively become tools for valid diagnosis of the spiritual dimension of sexual sin as well as proper treatment of the underlying spiritual ailment. Note the vices listed in verses nineteen to twenty-one; all are listed as “works of the flesh.” In other words, they are products of the sinful nature. Giving free reign to the sinful nature leads to indulgences forbidden by God and destructive to others.

Men whose bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit can exercise sexual restraint.

On the other hand, the virtues listed in verses twenty-two and twenty-three are not called “good works” or “works of the renewed will,” but rather “fruits of the Spirit.” In other words, genuine virtue is produced by the Holy Spirit, not dredged up from within. Virtues are the result, not the cause, of sanctification. Sanctification always remains the holiness bestowed by the Holy Spirit through faith. Good works and Christian virtue flow out of sanctification; they are not sanctification itself.

So also, Christian virtue is not a human achievement. Each virtue most properly belongs to Jesus Christ. Yet having been baptized into Christ, his virtues are bestowed on every believing Christian. The life baptized believers live in the flesh they live by faith in him. In a very real sense, Christ Jesus lives out his life through every member of his body, the church. As St. Paul would have it, “I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20).

SELF-CONTROL

This is the key to sexual chastity. Urges that seem all consuming and overwhelming can be tamed and redirected by God’s Spirit. The sexual tsunami of self-indulgence and its attendant tide of moral pollution can be averted. Instead of caving in to lustful passion, men whose bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit can exercise sexual restraint, combining moral strength with gentleness and self-control.

One caution, however: in this translation the English word *self-control* is misleading. The sanctification of sex does not magically make men masters of their own bodies. Sexual continence is always a gift of God. The virtue of self-control—this fruit of God’s Spirit—is better translated as “holding in” or “containing.” Not suppression, mind you, for no man can deny the impulses of his own body. He cannot suppress his potent sexual drive just by his own personal willpower. Rather, sexual chastity is the gift of God’s Spirit by which the powerful force of sex is first contained and then redirected; harnessed, one might say, for godly purposes. So abstinence apart from marriage and faithfulness within it is not the impossible dream, but a blessed

reality for the man who in cooperation with the Holy Spirit uses his masculinity in service of God and his neighbor.

As someone has noted, one is a whole number. Singleness should never be despised in the church. It is a holy calling. Unmarried men and women may be alone, but God forbid they should be lonely in the church; they have brothers and sisters in Christ and share each other’s burdens and joys. They are truly members one of another as the apostle writes, so viscerally and compellingly, about the organic and intimate unity within the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12–26). Singles are not second-class citizens in the kingdom of God.

Yet marriage also is a holy calling. Lifelong celibacy is a rare gift. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 7 the apostle candidly contends that marriage is in fact God’s remedy for sexual immorality. He writes, “It is better to marry than to burn with passion” (1 Cor 7:9). Both men and women were created with a natural instinct for sexual union within marriage that cannot be ignored. In a day and age in which marriage is commonly delayed well past puberty, St. Paul’s practical pastoral directive needs to be taken seriously. Sexual urges may be contained and redirected, but they cannot be avoided or denied.

Marriage is the holy estate designed by God in which man and woman are conjugally joined as one in body, mind, and spirit. In the union of husband and wife, the sexual drives of each are consecrated and directed to the spouse for mutual benefit instead of selfish gratification. The procreation and nurture of children is God’s intent through the life-long comprehensive union of husband and wife. In fact, holy matrimony is iconic of the marriage of Christ, the heavenly bridegroom, and his earthly bride, the church (Eph 5:32). In their mutual giving and receiving, especially in the marriage bed, husband and wife mirror the union of Jesus and his bride. This is, as the apostle writes, “a great mystery” transcending mere romantic bond or orgasmic release.

Yet whether sexually active (as in marriage) or abstinent (as in singleness) a man’s body is not his own; he has been bought with the price of the blood of God’s own Son. By the power of the Holy Spirit, he learns how to control his sex organs “in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God” (1 Thess 4:4–5). This is the life of holiness, genuine sanctification. It is not a project, but a gift. And it is most certainly not a do-it-yourself project.

SANCTIFIED FOR CHRIST’S MINISTRY

Who of us is capable of navigating the troubled waters of pastoral care in these gray and latter days? We certainly cannot accomplish this by our own reason or strength, but only by the power and presence of God’s sanctifying Spirit working through his word. Thank God, the same Holy Spirit who calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth will sanctify and keep those who are pastors with Jesus Christ in the one true faith, and faithful as his servants and stewards of God’s sacred mysteries. “Therefore, brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord forasmuch as you know that in the Lord your labor is never in vain” (1 Cor 15:58). **LOGIA**