

More Light, Less Heat on Sanctification and the Third Use

A Baptismal Virtue Ethics Proposal

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THERE REMAINS A LACK OF AGREEMENT about sanctification throughout larger Christianity today.¹ This is not all that surprising, of course. However, such disagreement is also found within the smaller confines of confessional Lutheranism. Unfortunately, as is typical of the antagonistic spirit of this age, the ability to have fraternal disagreements among confessional Lutherans (even on matters of secondary doctrine) regularly morph into cyberattacks against persons, the sacking of reputations, and even the questioning of Recognized Service Organizations (of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod), all in the misguided spirit of making a “Here I stand!” hill to die on.

The irony that this is happening in the context of sanctification and the third use of the law debates is rather glaring. Those who would normally stand together in a profound confession of Christ crucified for the sins of the world quickly and often antagonistically segment into like-minded digital groups. In these some even seem to band together under the Sith lord maxim: “If you’re not for us, you’re against us.” The result is that anyone disagreeing with the preferred position is ignored, discredited, and demonized. However, for those willing to listen I hope to hear all sides and then offer a way forward in the way of the gospel amid all the disagreement.

Simplifying to the extreme, arguments among confessional Lutherans today go back and forth about the true emphasis of sanctification and the role of the law in preaching to the sanctified. In other words, is sanctification an activity that primarily deals with our moral behavior and its practical implications (that is, virtue ethics and progressive sanctification)? Or is it an activity that primarily deals with the reception of Christ’s holiness and virtues through the means he has established: the gospel and the sacraments (that is, an ethics of holiness, or “Christ in action” within us)? Correspondingly, can the law (specifically the “third use” noted in the Lutheran Confessions²) be utilized in a sermon in a way that shows believers what the Christian life is to be and to do, while at the same time not also condemning or killing the hearer and negating the gospel?

As these issues relate to preaching, I have already written about them in some detail elsewhere, recognizing the complexity of the issues, while also remaining clear about the three uses

of the law and especially what the fullness of the gospel means for the life of the believer.³ Additionally, I have also offered a word or two on how this relates and is vital to the care of souls.⁴ I would also commend you to my colleague Harold Senkbeil’s article in this same issue for a rich and profound pastoral assessment on the care of souls that cherishes our robust Lutheran theology of sanctification and the third use of the law.

Essentially, my contention is that the current controversy should be addressed in the light of the proper distinction of law and gospel as it relates to faithful preaching and pastoral care for Christians who are simultaneously both saints and sinners. This is not difficult, if we keep our heads about us and discuss this in a fraternal manner. We have a rich and vibrant scriptural theology of sanctification as confessional Lutherans that informs and governs our practice. Namely, as I have written before,

sanctification proper refers directly to the holiness we receive from Christ, wherein the only progress we make is one of constant return to Christ and his holiness, but yet wherein the power of the gospel is such that it will certainly bring cleansing, healing, forgiveness, holiness, and subsequently an increase of fruit (works), as well as a decrease in evil desires and vice. To be sure, the law can certainly instruct and even guide, but it can never deliver or create these good works.⁵

1. Harold Senkbeil’s work *Sanctification: Christ in Action* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing, 1989) contrasts the Lutheran position of sanctification over and against the American evangelical perspective. However, for a formal evaluation of the broader differences among the wider Christianity see *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, ed. Donald L. Alexander (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988).
2. FC Ep and SD, Article VI, Concerning the Third Use of the Law.
3. Lucas V. Woodford, “Preaching the Virtues of Christ: Telling the Story in the Way of the Gospel for a Moral People Living in Immoral Times,” *Seelsorger* 3 (August, 2017): 49–74.
4. Lucas V. Woodford, “Holy God, Holy Things, Holy People: Pastoral Care in Proximity to God’s Holiness,” *Seelsorger* 1 (August, 2015): 105–36; Lucas V. Woodford, “Vice, Virtue, and Baptismal Therapy in the Care of Souls,” *Seelsorger* 2 (August, 2016): 35–64; Lucas V. Woodford, “Third Use of the Law and Sanctification In View of the Care of Souls,” *LOGIA* 26, no. 3 (Holy Trinity 2017): 52–53.
5. *Ibid.*, 53.

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Accordingly, what I propose here is a parallel emphasis to what I have already written, seeking to affirm the three uses of the law, but giving clarity and priority to the Lutheran doctrine of sanctification narrowly defined,⁶ while also emphasizing the power and prominence of the gospel in the spiritual and ethical life of the believer — something which I call “Baptismal Virtue Ethics.”⁷

FRAMING THE DEBATE

In short, the question being debated is whether the law, rather than the life of Christ and his Spirit (the gospel) at work in the believer, should be or can be used as the impetus and means to shape, evoke, create, or produce sanctified living in the believer who is simultaneously both saint and sinner. And with it comes the question of whether good works are to be equated *with* sanctification or do they flow *from* sanctification? These summary questions have spurred much of the current debate. Again, it is wrought out of the charge that many Lutheran preachers are not properly preaching the law and the gospel. And because of this, it is said dangerous tendencies and teachings, including charges of varying densities of antinomianism, are occurring within some Lutheran circles.⁸

More specifically, the assertion is that Lutheran preachers are failing to preach the law in a specific and proper “third use” way (that is, robust exhortation, encouragement, and teaching about how the Christian is to live). However, some hold that criticism would be dubious at best:

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6. See FC SD III: Righteousness, 40–41, esp. 41: “Thereafter, once people are justified, the Holy Spirit also renews and sanctifies them. From this renewal and sanctification the fruits of good works follow.” Note especially how the confessions show that good works are the fruit of sanctification and not the cause of it. See also Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1950–1957), 3:3–5.
7. An earlier version of the proposal in this essay appears in *Take Courage: Essays in Honor of Harold L. Senkbeil* (Irvine, CA: New Reformation Publications, 2017), under the title “Sanctification Revisited: Christ (and His Virtues) in Action.”
8. Lutherans Werner Elert and Gerhard Forde are two twentieth-century Lutheran theologians accused of denying the third use of the law, and thus potential culprits for the recent accusations of antinomianism. However, to track the beginnings of this recent debate one can consider Scott Murray’s book *Law, Life, and the Living God: The Third Use of the Law in Modern American Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2001), which sparked a recent massive resurgence of interest in the third use of the law. Soon after, a whole symposium was held on the “Law in Holy Scripture,” with the essays compiled into book form, *The Law in Holy Scripture*, ed. Charles A. Gieschen (St. Louis: Concordia, 2004). A whole issue of *Concordia Theological Quarterly* (69:3–4 [July/October 2005]) was dedicated to essays on the third use of the law with thoughtful articles from numerous theologians. Later, a formal response by Scott Murray to his critics was eventually also published in article form, “The Third Use of the Law: The Author Responds to His Critics,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 72 (2008): 99–118. And then, Ed Engelbrecht presented works that clarified Luther’s use and understanding of the third use of the law: first, “Luther’s Threefold Use of the Law,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 75 (2011): 135–50; and then put out an entire book on the matter, *Friends of the Law: Luther’s Use of the Law for the Christian Life* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2011).

A preacher is not called to use or apply the law according to its various uses. That task is left to the Holy Spirit to accomplish as he will wherever the law is preached in its full force. Any attempts to speak of the third use as if it were the preacher’s use are contrary to the intended sense of the Formula. The wording of the Solid Declaration must stand unqualified, that ‘it is just the Holy Ghost who uses the written law for instruction’ (SD VI, 3). Only in this way will one make proper use of the Evangelical Lutheran doctrine of the third use of the law.⁹

Therefore, it must be at least briefly noted that the one and same law with all its uses is always present regardless of one’s desired use or homiletical presentation of the law. And just to be clear, the three uses of the law are, as taught in *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation*, a “curb,” a “mirror,” and a “guide.”¹⁰ But perhaps those uses might also be reframed according to the following functions:

The law *proscribes*—it forbids things that are contrary to God’s will and dangerous to human life and threatens punishment against all who transgress;

The law *prescribes*—it teaches what is pleasing to God and what he demands;

The law *describes*—it shows what God in Christ is actually accomplishing in the life of the forgiven sinner by his Spirit through the baptismal life.

Keeping the above three functions of God’s law in view, we can see how God the Holy Spirit therefore uses his law. It is not only 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.

But again, to be clear, the law is utterly powerless to produce what it demands, proscribes, prescribes, or describes. Thus, homiletical approaches to the law as motivation for the Christian life must at a minimum recognize the limited power the law has upon the life of the believer, while at the same time clearly warning against careless preaching devoid of the third use.

To that end, the accusation of careless Lutheran preaching is the very charge that Joel Biermann asserts in his book *The Case for Character: Towards A Lutheran Virtue Ethic*. He is not alone in making this charge.¹¹ Unfortunately, he leaves that charge unsubstantiated. And aside from some less-than-fraternal

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9. Jonathan G. Lange, “Using the Third Use: Formula of Concord VI and the Preacher’s Task,” *LOGIA* 3, no. 1 (Epiphany 1994): 23, a very thoughtful essay that dealt directly with this issue written prior to these most recent debates on the third use of the law.
10. *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation: English Standard Version* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 96–97.
11. The sainted Kurt Marquart also took issue with modern confessional Lutheran preaching not long before his passing: “[T]he neo-antinomian avoidance of sanctification and the Third Use in much modern Lutheran preaching is harmful and should be corrected” (“The Third Use of The Law as Confessed in the Formula of Concord,” in *You, My People, Shall Be Holy: A Festschrift in Honour of*

blogs in the cybersphere, I have yet to come across any scholarly or formal critical assessment of modern Lutheran preaching to help substantiate these claims.

Nonetheless, I will take Biermann and others making the claim at face value. Biermann writes:

An emphatic and unapologetic concentration on the declaration of free forgiveness for the sake of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is a hallmark of Christian faith—but it can also lead to a denigration and dismissal of any concrete or specific articulation of the way of life for Christians. In the name of ‘gospel freedom,’ it is sometimes insisted that the only acceptable norm for the Christian is the gospel of love, and that any attempt to spell out more clearly the content of that love is a faithless capitulation to morality and works righteousness. One purpose of this book is to consider this problem as a theological problem.¹²

Biermann uses this accusation as the launching pad of his book and as the rationale to make a case for a Lutheran virtue ethics, which ultimately ends up being based upon the law (though described in his terms of three kinds of righteousness), thus undermining the transformative power of the new life given to the believer through the gospel.¹³

To elaborate, his concern stems from those who are “captive to their antinomianism” and thus only promote “ethical failure” and “practical atheism.”¹⁴ His desire is noble, as he wants the church and her preachers to cultivate a virtuous people. But again, though there may be truth to his claim, his lack of documented evidence against confessional Lutheran preaching is a detriment that is unfortunately amplified all the more by a stunning broadside against the historic Lutheran law-gospel approach to preaching the Scriptures:

Although the law-gospel dynamic might be assumed to be the authentically Lutheran framework, it is not only incapable of managing all the realities and challenges of life and doctrine but, used as an overall framework, it is finally detrimental to the vitality of Lutheranism.¹⁵

John W. Kleinig, ed. John R. Stephenson and Thomas M. Winger [St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada: Concordia Lutheran Theological Seminary, 2013], 115–16).

12. Joel D. Biermann, *A Case for Character: Towards a Lutheran Virtue Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 3.
13. These three forms of righteousness are labeled (1) governing righteousness, (2) justifying righteousness, (3) conforming righteousness. They are examined as they relate to each other, but where the third kind, the conforming righteousness, is deemed the “righteousness that is actively lived,” and wherein he also asserts that each “possible understanding of conforming righteousness constitutes one of the traditions or narrative communities within Christendom that suggests specific and sometimes contradictory guidance on what comprises the faithful Christian life. . . . This variety within the category of conforming righteousness should be expected and even welcomed” (ibid., 130, 132).
14. Ibid., 8.
15. Ibid., 117–18. Likewise, David Scaer partially echoes Biermann’s

Offering such an overt affront against the hallmark of confessional Lutheranism is no small occurrence. It is also perhaps indicative of why his attempt of representing a truly Lutheran virtue ethics appears to fall short, at least in the humble assessment of this reader.

The immorality of our time now afflicting Christians today must be met with the sanctifying washing of a baptismal virtue ethics.

What I propose below is an alternative beginning framework to Biermann’s virtue ethics, as well as an answer to the ongoing debates regarding the proper emphasis of sanctification and the third use of the law in the life of the believer. This alternative is obviously going to be rooted in the robust Lutheran doctrine of sanctification (again particularly understood in the narrow dogmatic sense). Specifically, sanctification here refers not simply and only to the good works a believer does, but more properly to the righteousness and holiness of Christ received in sanctification, which creates a renewal of the spiritual nature from which “the fruit of good works follow” (FC SD III, 41).

Accordingly, with the massive “moral revolution”¹⁶ flooding our culture and church, Lutherans do well to continue delivering Christ as the sanctifying source of all morality and life. In fact, just like at the beginning of the church (Acts 2:38–39), the immorality of our time now afflicting Christians today must

critique by noting the abuse of the law-gospel homiletic, but please note, unlike Biermann, he does not diagnose the law-gospel dynamic itself as detrimental: “For self-styled confessional minded preachers, the core meaning of a biblical passage is exhausted if, after bringing the people to their knees, they are lifted up by the gospel. In certain and perhaps most cases, the imposition of the principle curtails rather than helps determine what was on the mind of the inspired writer. Walther did not preach like this, as is obvious from his robust engagement with the biblical texts, but the law-gospel principle came to form the basis of ‘Gospel reductionism.’ Preach law and gospel and the preacher has license to say whatever he or she wants about the biblical text” (“Walther, the Third Use of the Law, and Contemporary Issues,” *Concordia Lutheran Quarterly* 75 [2011]: 338).

16. R. Albert Mohler uses the phrase “moral revolution” in his recent compelling book that offers a blunt assessment of our culture’s condition: “We are facing a complete transformation of the way human beings relate to one another in the most intimate contexts of life. We are facing nothing less than a comprehensive redefinition of life, love, liberty, and the very meaning of right and wrong” (*We Cannot Be Silent: Speaking Truth to a Culture Redefining Sex, Marriage, and the Very Meaning of Right and Wrong* [Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2015], 1).

be met with the sanctifying washing of a baptismal virtue ethics that delivers the identity, character, virtues, and ethics of Jesus Christ to believers, right along with his forgiveness, righteousness, holiness, and innocence. Christ Jesus himself is, according to St. Paul, “wisdom from God” precisely because he is not merely our “redemption,” but simultaneously both our “righteousness” (justification) and our “holiness” (sanctification) (1 Cor 1:30). Both pastor and parishioner will benefit from believing that the sanctified life is the virtuous ethical life. To help understand this proposed baptismal virtue ethics, a brief assessment of classical virtue ethics is provided.

DEFINITIONS

Let’s begin by clarifying our definitions. First is *virtue*. The wider Christian tradition holds that a “moral virtue is a settled disposition of a person to act in excellent and praiseworthy ways, cultivated over time through habit.”¹⁷ Similarly, the classical perspective, going back to Aristotle, asserts that virtues are habitual, affective dispositions that govern behavior. As such, attaining virtues—like the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance—will “enable man to attain the furthest potentialities of his nature.”¹⁸ In other words, they will actualize within a person a new state of being.

Ethics is the moral principles that guide human behavior.

However, can the mere practice of, or exhortation to practice, those virtues (that is, preaching the third use of the law) change our being? Or is it that our being is first changed, which then creates the capacity to practice those virtues? I am making the case for the latter, with the receptive life confessed in our Lutheran theology of sanctification providing the clear impetus to do so. But the definition of our terms must first be completed.

In the case of virtue, the term *potentialities* (from above) is abstract. In fact, language for both sanctification and virtue ethics often becomes rather abstract. My aim is to unveil those abstractions in order to get to the core of daily Christian living and the very true spiritual reality that goes with it. Thus, when it comes to unpacking virtues and their corresponding “potentialities,” noted Lutheran ethicist Gilbert Meilaender helps us see the big picture by bringing the abstract into practical focus:

The moral virtues—those excellences which help us attain the furthest potentialities of our nature—are, then, not simply dispositions to act in certain ways. They are more like skills which suit us for life generally—and still more like traits of character which not only suit us for life but shape our vision of life, helping to determine not only who we are but what world we see.¹⁹

Meilaender helps us see, quite literally, the big picture when it comes to understanding virtues. As such, his definition of virtues makes things clear: they are skills, habits, dispositions, and traits that exemplify the morally excellent life.

Next, how do we define *ethics*? Quite simply, ethics is the moral principles that guide human behavior. It is the system of knowledge that allows one to distinguish between right and wrong, good and evil, justice and crime, vice and virtue. One might say it is a parallel to God’s law. In short, ethics seeks to resolve questions of human morality. More specifically, Christian ethics examines how a believer lives all of life in conformity to the word of God.

Thus, when virtues are combined with ethics to become virtue ethics, it means that the passions, desires, thoughts, and behaviors of a person are to be shaped by a morally excellent way of life. From one Lutheran perspective, ethics is the “critical and constructive reflection on Christian moral practice,” which, for Robert Benne, makes it “both descriptive and normative.”²⁰ In other words, it is an intellectual theological activity (descriptive) and at the same time a practical moral activity (normative). Therefore, when a specific form of positive morality (virtues) is combined with the knowledge to discern what is good and bad (ethics), virtue ethics begins to take shape. But to be clear, virtue ethics is invariably more complex. However, the point has been to draw out its emphasis on the role of character and virtue in our moral being. Which brings us to the larger point.

These definitions indicate a decidedly anthropocentric (man-centered) perspective. That is, the emphasis stands primarily upon human desire, action, behavior, and will, along with a humanly created identity. But as we will see, there is certainly more going on here than purely human effort and will-power. Sanctification helps clarify this, particularly when one considers, as Biermann himself notes, that “ethics can rightly be understood as a reflection on the subject of sanctification.”²¹ However, how we understand sanctification becomes critical.

SANCTIFICATION REVISITED: LIFE IN THE EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

There is much in common between sanctification and virtue ethics. Rightly understood, one can certainly say the sancti-

17. Karl Clifton-Soderstrom, *The Cardinal and the Deadly: Reimagining the Seven Virtues and Seven Vices* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 4.

18. Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 2014), xii.

19. Gilbert C. Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1984), 11.

20. Robert Benne, “Lutheran Ethics: Perennial Themes and Contemporary Challenges,” in *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*, ed. Karen L. Bloomquist and John R. Stumme (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 11.

21. Biermann, *Case for Character*, 11.

fied life is the virtuous life. But how that life comes to be is the question being debated. Is it something achieved with much personal effort and discipline, flowing from the exhortation of the law, or is it something given to the believer and received over and over again as a gift of grace to believe and live within?

How this is answered has profound implications for how we understand Christian identity and character, as well as how we live the overall Christian life. This is especially true in our twenty-first-century digital culture of perpetual “likes” and “followers,” along with the prevailing “moral revolution” that is wrapped up in the new sexual expressiveness and so-called sexual orientation, along with the gender identity movement. Nonetheless, to answer accurately, we first need to be clear on definitions—of virtues, ethics, and sanctification. How we understand them all obviously informs how we speak of them.

Consider the moral revolution facing the church today, not to mention the digital age that constantly teaches us to look *to* ourselves and *at* ourselves. As we post our segmented, fragmented, and exaggerated lives on Facebook, YouTube, Pinterest, and Twitter, we dare not shrink back from addressing the sanctified life. In fact, Harold Senkbeil offered a clarion call that still applies as much today as when he first wrote it nearly three decades ago:

[W]e need a new Lutheran initiative in demonstrating the dynamic truth and practicality of our scriptural doctrine for every Christian’s life.²²

In other words, Lutheran theology—particularly the doctrine of sanctification—is relevant, practical, and biblical. Not simply an abstract thought, sanctification confesses a spiritual reality that has practical application for the life of every Christian. Lutheran pastors are here invited to a more vigorous practical “initiative” in preaching, teaching, and living it, and there is no better time than the present.

A case in point is the tsunami of sexual expressiveness and gender dysphoria washing over our culture and wiping out the biblical institution of marriage, and the divinely created distinctions of male and female human identity. Simultaneously, it is wreaking utter havoc upon the hearts and minds of both children and adults through its continuously available and accessible digital pornography. Without question, the law must be preached and taught to a lawless generation.

Yet, to be clear, all the sins associated with this moral revolution are more than just a matter of immoral acts. They include the corresponding spiritual contamination of those acts, as well as the completely new identity and foreign moral character being established by whole segments of people associated with those acts. For example, consider what has become known as the LGBTQA. For the Christian sinner, this insight helps heighten the importance not just of the moral or ethical aspect of sanctification, but especially the spiritual cleansing and purifying force of sanctification upon the believer.

At the turn of the millennium, James Davison Hunter told us “character is dead” altogether. Sadly, he said any attempts to “revive” it, at least in the traditional sense, “will yield little.”²³ Though perhaps a startling occurrence, it was not surprising to Hunter. This was simply the natural result of society’s stripping the self of its morality: “When the self is stripped of moral anchoring, there is nothing which the will is bound to submit, nothing innate to keep it in check.”²⁴ Today we are observing the pinnacle of this cultural madness and mayhem.

The law must be preached and taught to a lawless generation.

Of course, many in the church are also adversely affected as a result. Many Christians are caught in the sexual temptations of alternate “lifestyles.” They have been influenced by the cultural lies of newly created terms to justify their sexual identity and the normalization of their behavior. The nonbiblical notions of sexual “orientation” and “gender identity” are terms that give a new and alternate identity, which serves to validate what society as a whole formerly considered to be an immoral lifestyle. Without question, the law must be preached in all its proscriptive, prescriptive, and descriptive force. But it cannot provide the power for a new moral life.

Rather, now, as ever, the church needs to be clear on the cleansing, purging, and purifying work of Christ in sanctification. Now, as ever, the church must bring hope to the defiled, truth to the confused, and relief to the tortured souls of our day. They, along with every last sinner on the face of the planet, need the cleansing, purging, healing, and sanctifying power of the gospel—not just for the forgiveness of sins, but for the reception of a holy identity and a holy lifestyle that comes through Jesus Christ.

As such, the argument being advanced here comes from the Lutheran perspective that sanctification and the virtuous life are both a matter of the receptive life; both refer to life lived out of the ritual and habitual reception of the gifts of grace from our triune God. The reception of the righteousness and holiness of Jesus are especially significant. Though perhaps abstract terms, the righteousness and holiness of Jesus create a very real reality, which also shapes moral behavior and gives a distinct holy identity.

As will be demonstrated, the receptive life includes the reception of the virtues of Christ himself, which are what give shape to the moral behavior and content to Christian identity.

22. Senkbeil, *Sanctification*, 18.

23. James Davison Hunter, *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age Without Good or Evil* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), xiii.

24. *Ibid.*, xiv.

In other words, Christ gives his virtuous works, behaviors, desires, and passions to believers to be their very own works, behaviors, desires, and passions in which to live and move and have their being. As Paul says, “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). The same is true for the identity of believers. His identity becomes our identity. Again, as Paul says: “[F]or in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal 3:26–27).

THE RECEPTIVE LIFE

Believers receive all from Christ. Begun in Holy Baptism, and situated amid the habitual life of repentance and prayer (the daily dying and rising with Christ), the Christian life is the receptive life that is lived out of Christ.²⁵ In his first book Harold Senkbeil aptly called this “Christ in action” among us. In his second and magisterial book *Dying to Live: The Power of Forgiveness*, he expounds on this even more, saying: “[T]he work of every Christian in the world is actually the work Jesus Christ is doing in and through that Christian.”²⁶ Christ is quite literally all in all.

Sanctification, then, is not merely the believer’s practical living and good works “for Jesus,” but rather Jesus’ life-giving work “for us” through his cross and resurrection. There Christ is at work “in us” by his word and Holy Spirit, given “to us” in Holy Baptism, for a good conscience and the forgiveness of sins. By it, God sanctifies and makes sinners holy²⁷ and the resulting fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23) that is produced “in us” is for the good of our neighbor and the glory of God. Therefore, sinners are not to look inward for strength and life, but rather outward to Christ and his word.

The true Christian lifestyle consists of sinners’ daily living out their baptism by dying and rising with Jesus through contrition and repentance. In baptism our “being” is made new.

Contrary to the classic approach to virtues and identity which emphasizes self-development, we are a “new creation” in Christ (2 Cor 5:17). Thus, our identity and life flow from Christ and not our own works, behaviors, passions, or desires.

That is why, like Luther in the Small Catechism, Senkbeil is so adamant that “the Christian life is a daily return to our baptism—a life lived under the cross, in partnership with Jesus.”²⁸ Likewise, the Christian is given a holy identity, not by our own works, behavior, or achievement, but by Christ, who baptismally covers us with his righteousness, holiness, and his very self (Gal 3:27). Simply put, sanctification is the life of Christ for us, and the life Christ lives through us.

Sanctification is not merely the believer’s practical living and good works “for Jesus,” but rather Jesus’ life-giving work “for us.”

This certainly does not reduce the place of virtues (or good works) in the life of Christians. Rather, it clarifies exactly what occurs in virtue ethics from a distinctly Lutheran perspective. The goal, of course, is to identify the power and source of the virtuous life, proclaim it, and enact it. To do so, the Lutheran view of sanctification is harnessed as a framework and approach to virtue ethics.

As sanctification is Christ in action in us, the claim here is that Christian ethics is the virtues of Christ in action in us. Significant ethical implications for Christian identity and lifestyle result from this understanding. For instance, Christian ethics can reveal how the baptismal identity of an individual becomes a crucial active agent in the struggle against temptation and sin—particularly sexual sins and alternate lifestyles. This becomes vitally important for pastors of the early-twenty-first century to utilize amid our culture’s infatuation with gender identity and sexual expressiveness.

What is more, in a culture obsessed with normalizing moral transgressions and its debased byproducts, the Lutheran doctrine of sanctification confesses the full, defiling effects of sin. In other words, not only do the moral infractions (that is, the bad deeds) of sin need to be treated and remedied, so does all the corresponding spiritual contamination. Our theology recognizes that the sins we commit, as well as the sins committed against us, require the holiness of God and the cleansing

25. John Kleinig offers this about receptive spirituality: “Christian spirituality is, quite simply, following Jesus. It is the ordinary life of faith in which we receive Baptism, attend the Divine Service, participate in the Holy Supper, read the Scriptures, pray for ourselves and others, resist temptation, and work with Jesus in our given location here on earth” (*Grace Upon Grace: Spirituality for Today* [St. Louis: Concordia, 2008], 23).

26. Senkbeil, *Dying to Live: The Power of Forgiveness* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1994), 161.

27. The little word *holy* is often overlooked and underemphasized. To be made holy is nothing of our doing. It is entirely the work of God. Yet part of the confusion today is that many think they can attain holiness through acts of the law. But the holy living being spoken of here refers to life lived in the holiness borrowed from Jesus Christ. For fine treatments on holiness, see John W. Kleinig’s works: “Worship and the Way of Holiness,” *LOGIA* 16, no. 1 (Epiphany 2007): 5–8; “Sharing in God’s Holiness,” *Lutheran Theological Review* 8 (1995): 105–18; “Luther on the Christian’s Participation in God’s Holiness,” *Lutheran Theological Journal* 19 (1985): 21–29; *Leviticus*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2003); *Grace Upon Grace*.

28. Luther’s Small Catechism, iv (Baptism); Senkbeil, *Sanctification*, 140. See also Senkbeil, *Dying to Live*, 62: “By baptism into Christ we have a whole new life ahead of us. Our old life has disappeared—baptized, dead, and buried into the death of the Crucified One. A new man emerges from that watery grave. Joined with our risen Lord, we rise to live a new life in Him.”

blood of Jesus Christ to sanctify and heal us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:7).

Ultimately, this approach seeks to provide the church with an ethic of holiness that hinges upon the receptive life of faith in Christ rather than attempted adherence to the law. This approach provides a distinct perspective that focuses on the regenerative power of the gospel, which will be unpacked as baptismal virtue ethics.

TOWARDS A BAPTISMAL VIRTUE ETHICS: THE VIRTUES OF CHRIST IN ACTION

The classic tradition of virtue ethics notes that people must practice habits that lead them to acquire various virtues. In so doing, they actualize their potential, and create a new being within themselves. This approach emphasizes human willpower and effort as the mode of acquisition. However, Christian virtue ethics asserts God as an active participant in the process. To be sure, there are various Christian approaches to virtue ethics, but space does not afford for a comparative look at the various versions.²⁹ It must suffice here to note that the different perspectives assert different degrees of God's activity within the life of the believer. Most tend to assert that God is active, but that it is still ultimately up to the individual person to strive for and acquire the various virtues and corresponding moral character.

However, the perspective taken here recognizes the utterly depraved nature of the human soul, which cannot draw goodness or virtue from within the self (Gen 8:21). We are completely dependent upon Christ and his gifts of grace. This means we are dependent upon Christ for virtues, character, and identity. Christ enacts the virtues within us, not by magic or some secret, but through the washing and renewal of Holy Baptism (Titus 3:5–8). Thus, as the sanctified life flows out of baptism, so the virtuous life flows out of baptism.

Luther brings this out in his Large Catechism:

Every Christian has enough in Baptism to learn and to do all his life. For he has always enough to do by believing firmly what Baptism promises and brings: victory over death and the devil, forgiveness of sin, God's grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with His gifts.

Thus a Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism, begun once and continuing ever after. For we must keep at it without ceasing, always purging whatever pertains to the old Adam, so that whatever belongs to the new

creature may come forth. What is the old creature? It is what is born in us from Adam, irascible, spiteful, envious, unchaste, greedy, lazy, proud—yes—and unbelieving; it is beset with all vices and by nature has nothing good in it. Now, when we enter Christ's kingdom, this corruption must daily decrease so that the longer we live the more gentle, patient, and meek we become, and the more we break away from greed, hatred, envy, and pride. This is the right use of baptism among Christians. (LC IV, 41, 66–68)

Since sanctification is Christ in action in us, the corollary proposition is that Christian ethics is simply the virtues of Christ in action in us. This section explains how the virtues of Christ are at work in the life of the baptized, referred to here as baptismal virtue ethics. The following section details the specific and important habits of baptismal virtue ethics, namely, repentance and prayer.

Christ never gives himself out in parts or pieces.

Baptismal virtue ethics begins with the faith given in baptism, which apprehends the whole of Christ and all his gifts. Christ never gives himself out in parts or pieces. One either gets all of him, with all his gifts, or nothing at all. An example of this is when Paul tells the Corinthians, "It is because of [God] that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption" (1 Cor 1:30). Mixed in with "righteousness," "holiness," and "redemption" is the cardinal virtue of wisdom—Christ "has become for us wisdom from God." As such, we can conclude that the virtues of Christ are most certainly also included in the baptismal gifts of Christ. Christ is all in all, and gives to receptive souls all his good gifts of life and salvation.

It becomes readily apparent, then, that the gospel rather than the law operates as the power and force behind baptismal virtue ethics. Again, the law can certainly describe that life, demand that life, and guide one in that life, but it cannot *give* that life. That power comes from the gospel alone.

Similarly, the law can certainly instruct in Christian character, virtue, and habits. But it cannot deliver that character, virtue, or habit. Jesus Christ delivers them all to us in his own person. Yet, he did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill the law (Matt 5:17). He did so with perfect obedience to the heavenly Father, never once sinning, and yet he was innocently put to death for our sins, to suffer the wrath of God in our place. He fulfilled the law in our place. By faith in Christ, we receive the righteousness of one who fulfilled the law, as if we fulfilled the law ourselves. Therefore, to say Jesus gives us the fulfilled law along with his righteousness is not out of line.

29. Some prominent differing perspectives are these: (1) the abundant works of Stanley Hauerwas, in particular his work *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1981) and his work *Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998); (2) the Roman Catholic perspective given by Pope John Paul II's *Veritas Splendor* and Pope Benedict XVI's *Deus Caritas Est*. However, a more accessible and helpful aid to understand these teachings is offered by Romanus Cessario in his book *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 2009); and (3) the insightful Lutheran perspective from Gilbert Meilaender in *The Theory and Practice of Virtue*.

In fact, this point is quite significant. The righteousness that Jesus gives to us by faith includes all his own virtuous acts, deeds, desires, and passions, along with the whole fulfilled law he accomplished for us in our place. As Paul says, “Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes” (Rom 10:4). Again, Christ is all in all; he supplies all that we need.

Faith calls us to receive his courage and self-control, and then put it into action in our lives.

Accordingly, we are no longer under the law or slaves to the law, but in Christ we are under grace (Rom 6:14). The Christian, then, believes we have access to moral character, virtue, and a holy, righteous identity through Jesus Christ. This is more than a mere mental thought or intellectual exercise designed to encourage someone to act like Jesus. This is an exercise of faith, an exercise that believes what Jesus has given us and clearly acts upon it.

Paul helps us again: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal 3:27). Plain and simple, baptized believers have put on the virtues of Jesus. Baptized into Christ “we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph 2:10). Faith calls us to believe the gospel and trust that Jesus not only gives us his forgiveness, righteousness, and holiness to secure our standing before the heavenly Father and gain eternity in heaven, but that he also gives us his character, his identity, and his virtues to take as our very own and lead us in our life, in this culture, at this time, here on this earth.

For example, consider someone who desires courage and self-control (the classic virtues of fortitude and temperance). Bearing up under the pressures of this decaying culture with a resolute and faithful witness to Christ is not easy. However, Christ gives us the virtues we need to bear up under the weight and scorn of the unbelieving world (Luke 12:12; 21:15). Just as Jesus was made fun of, mocked, beaten, and bloodied, and his suffering paraded out in front of everyone, so baptized believers put on the very virtues he displayed while he suffered—not magically, not secretly, but the same way he gives all his good gifts: by faith. And faith calls us to receive his courage and self-control, and then put it into action in our lives. The point is to look to Christ for strength, to see what Christ has placed upon us, and then to act upon it by faith. Faith is a living, busy, active thing after all.

Another example: Perhaps someone is seeking justice. Here we must be sure to distinguish between the desire for justice,

and the desire to be a just person. This becomes significant in a society filled with the continual loss of religious liberty, and the injustices that continue to occur to United States citizens who are Christians (for example, bakers, florists, and photographers). Even so, by faith we look to the cross and see Jesus enduring the just punishment we deserved. Yet, we also see his self-control, his courage, and his love, which have all been baptismally imparted to us.

Therefore, with the hope that comes with Christ’s resurrection and ascension, Christians walk by faith and put this justice, self-control, love, and hope into action, even if it means suffering and loss. We are united to that part of Christ as well. As the Scriptures say: “We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body” (2 Cor 4:10–11). The virtues of Christ do not guarantee the trouble-free life; rather they mean the life united to Christ and his cross.

Up to this point, this essay has presented a description of how the virtues of Christ are received, and what the virtues of Christ in action look like. Though brief, this introduction has demonstrated that the reception of the virtues of Christ are part of the regenerative effects of the gospel upon the Christian. This occurs by faith, which looks to Christ, but certainly also utilizes reason and logic. Of course, a more detailed explanation of this, along with the comparative aspects of other various virtue ethics would need to be more carefully explained in a broader treatment. Nonetheless, the power behind this baptismal virtue ethics is always Christ, which has been exemplified above.

However, the question remains, how does the believer maintain, cultivate, and sustain these virtues of Christ? As already noted, the exhortation of the law is powerless to deliver these virtues. So, if we are beggars and receive all from Christ, what does the receptive life look like and sound like? What habits are seen and heard? And how are these different than the virtues of Christ lived out in the believer? The habits that make us receptive to the virtues of Christ are indeed different than enacting the virtues of Christ in our vocational life. Therefore, we need to identify the habits of baptismal virtue ethics. This next section explores how the habits of prayer and repentance are vital elements of baptismal virtue ethics.

TOWARDS A BAPTISMAL VIRTUE ETHICS: THE HOLY HABITS OF PRAYER AND REPENTANCE

The sanctified life is the receptive life. The depravity of our soul means we must borrow and receive everything from Jesus. “We are beggars,” as Luther said, which is why this proposed baptismal virtue ethics follows his lead, recognizing that this is not a practice of spiritual self-development, “but a process of reception from the triune God.”³⁰ The receptive life means faith is exercised in specific ways as it receives the gifts of God through his appointed means of grace (word and sacrament). We ex-

30. Kleinig, *Grace Upon Grace*, 16.

ercise faith in two ways, both of which are integral to the development of baptismal virtue ethics — prayer and repentance.

Prayer and repentance are doorways that open us up to receive more and more of Jesus and his sanctifying and regenerative power. We daily sin much. We are defiled and contaminated by sin day by day. Consequently, we need more and more of Christ's righteousness, holiness, and virtues to bear up amid our daily lives and deal with the sin of our lives. But how do prayer and repentance aid us to receive more and more of Jesus? To help answer this, Luther's explanation of the baptized Christian life in his Large Catechism is again worth quoting at length:

Therefore it may serve to remind us and impress upon us not to become negligent about praying. We all have needs enough but the trouble is that we do not feel or see them. God therefore wishes you to lament and express your needs and wants, not because he is unaware of them, but in order that you may kindle your heart to stronger and greater desires and spread your cloak wide to receive many things. Each of us should form the habit from his youth to pray daily. (LC III, 27–28)

What is repentance but an earnest attack on the old creature and an entering into a new life? If you live in repentance, therefore, you are walking in baptism, which not only announces this new life but also produces, begins, and exercises it. In baptism we are given the grace, Spirit, and strength to suppress the old creature so that the new may come forth and grow strong. Therefore Baptism remains forever. . . . Even though we fall from it and sin, nevertheless, we always have access to it so that we may again subdue the old man. (LC IV, 75–76)

Repentance, therefore, is nothing else than a return to baptism, to resume and practice what has earlier been begun but abandoned. . . . Therefore let everybody regard baptism as the daily garment which he is to wear all the time. Every day he should be found in faith and amid its fruits, every day he should be suppressing the old man and growing in the new. If we wish to be Christians, we must practice the work that makes us Christians (LC IV, 79, 84–85).

Luther pointedly emphasizes the habits we must keep if we are to continue receiving life from Jesus. Practicing the “work that makes us Christian” does not refer to specific good works or virtues, but to the habits of prayer and repentance.

Prayer is simply communication with our triune God in words and thoughts. Yet, simple as it seems, it is often difficult and hard to do. Our sinful nature and the assaults of the devil make that certain. However, Jesus draws us into himself and gives us words to pray, most especially in the Lord's Prayer. He also demonstrates the important regular habit of prayer throughout his earthly ministry.

As we are baptized into Jesus, he gives us more than just a set prayer to model for all our prayers. Jesus “gives us His own status as God's Son and allows us to share in all the privileges

of his unique relationship with His Heavenly Father.”³¹ This is no small occurrence. Once again, Christ is all in all! Our union with Christ even permeates our prayers. As John Kleinig notes:

By giving us His prayer, He includes us in His relationship with His Father and allows us to act as if we were Him, dressed up in Him (cf. Romans 13:14; Galatians 3:26–27). By giving us His prayer, Jesus puts us in His shoes and involves us in His royal mission, the holy vocation as the royal Son of God. We may therefore stand in His shoes and pray with Him for the hallowing of His Father's name and the coming of His Father's Kingdom.³²

In other words, prayer keeps us receptive to the gifts of God. One example is a prayer of thanksgiving. Giving thanks to God for what he has given to us keeps us all the more mindful of what we need, and therefore we return all the more to Christ in order to receive from his gifts, asking of him what we lack (for example, the cardinal virtue of wisdom).

Suffice it to say, the habit of prayer is essential to baptismal virtue ethics.

Paul describes this for us in numerous places, but one in particular brings everything together in three verses:

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. . . . For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. (Col 2:6, 9–10)

Much more could be said, but again that remains for another time. Suffice it to say, the habit of prayer is essential to baptismal virtue ethics.

Now we press on to the final component of this proposal, the role of repentance. To help us put this into practical, daily-life terms, we again turn to Luther, but this time in his Small Catechism. He notes the vital connection between baptism and repentance when he considers what baptism truly indicates for the Christian:

It indicates that the old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge

31. Ibid., 163.

32. Ibid.

and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever. (SC IV)

Putting it simply, to live out our baptism we must repent. When dangerous passions and “evil desires” disorder life, lead to sin, and defile our life, baptism calls every sinner to repentance. Not just here and there. Not just once a week at church. But “daily.” We are to *daily* practice the habit of repentance. And of course, the law plays a role here telling us what is sin, and of what we are to repent. Yet, to be clear, in repentance Christians not only confess sin, but turn away from that sin or “evil desire” in sorrow and contrition. Our sinful thoughts, behaviors, and vices stop. We confess them as wrong. We plead for mercy and forgiveness. In so doing, we spiritually crucify the sinful self and bury it with Christ (Rom 6:4). We spiritually drown the sinful self and mortify the flesh. The habit of daily repentance therefore brings with it an ethic of faith.

Putting it simply, to live out our baptism we must repent.

Most Christian virtue ethics give little or no treatment to repentance, but it is an utterly essential part of baptismal virtue ethics. Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us what it means:

When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die. It may be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and work to follow him, or it may be a death like Luther’s, who had to leave the monastery and go out into the world. But it is the same death every time—death in Jesus Christ, the death of the old man at his call. . . . In fact every command of Jesus is a call to die, with all our affections and lusts.³³

Bonhoeffer reminds us that discipleship is costly. It cost Jesus his life, so it costs us our life as well. We must die to ourselves; our desires, passions, and lusts, along with our sinful behaviors, unclean acts, and our immoral identity, must all be put away. Repentance constantly throws ourselves before Jesus, asking for forgiveness and receiving his holiness, receiving more and more of his virtues, by which we resist temptation and do good works that serve our neighbor.

Jesus himself began his ministry by preaching, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). In practical terms, this means a submission of the will, a reordering of the intellect, a changing of the passions, and a remaking of our character, which includes changes to our thinking, acting, and speaking, and having them all replaced with the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23), which are also all virtues of Christ.

But, to be clear, repentance does not produce the Christian’s new being, just like prayer does not produce the Christian’s new being. The “new man” results from the work of Christ and his Spirit upon the sinner. Christ gives his “being” (Gal 3:26–27) to the baptized sinner so that our “being” becomes wrapped up in his being, and consequently our identity, behaviors, thoughts, and desires all emanate from his being and his virtues at work in us.

CONCLUSION: A BAPTISMAL VIRTUE ETHICS FOR PASTOR AND PEOPLE

The words of Paul go to the core of baptismal virtue ethics: “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).

This is good news for the people of our time and culture! With the moral revolution going mad, baptized Christians have the hope of Christ in them. Christ in action amid our lives defines the sanctified life. The Lutheran theology of sanctification provides a grand platform to develop a baptismal virtue ethics and help shine more light (and less heat) upon the sanctification and third-use debates. Though a small beginning, this provides a framework of thought for future development.

Advocating for moral character and the virtuous life remains a noble endeavor, but to be Lutheran about it does so from the strength and power of the gospel. This proposal has done that, focusing not upon specific virtues in themselves, or the behavior of the believer to attain those virtues, but upon Christ, who lived those virtues in his life, death, and resurrection, and gives those virtues to believers through baptism. Through them, as in sanctification, he works within the daily life of believers. Cultivating character and virtue therefore remains a baptismal endeavor that lives out one’s faith and identity in Christ. To make it simply a moral endeavor omits the fullness of the gospel’s regenerating power, and falls short of the mark.

This becomes particularly helpful for pastors as they endeavor to give care to the souls of our time. Baptismal virtue ethics provides important habits of faith in prayer and repentance. It keeps sinners united to Christ through word and sacrament, and it provides a distinct identity, with distinct character, for daily living amid the temptations of life, in the various vocations of daily life. **LOGIA**

33. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995, 1937 original), 89–90.