

Luther on the Christian's Participation in God's Holiness

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The theology of the Lutheran Church has been shaped by Luther's teaching on justification by faith. The language of justification is derived analogically from the operation of the royal courts and their administration of justice. In this way of thinking, God is envisaged as a king, who deals with evildoers in his kingdom by the exercise of justice or of mercy. This judicial metaphor sets the basic framework for classical Lutheran theology. All aspects of the faith are related to it and seen in its light.

Since this is so, Lutherans can at times fail to do full justice to other modes of expression in the Scriptures. The language of holiness, so central to Roman Catholic and Orthodox theology, is an example of this. Classical Lutheran theology tends to limit its teaching on sanctification to the life of moral renewal and good works that follows from justification, even though Lutheran worship and pastoral practice hint at a broader conception than this.¹ By this limitation, the Lutheran dogmatic tradition can all too easily dissociate holiness from its proper liturgical context and give it a social setting that obscures some of its distinctive features.

It is true that Luther is somewhat unsystematic in his writing about sanctification, and loose in his use of terminology. He tends to heap up images and expressions, without due regard for dogmatic precision. He does, at times, identify cleansing with justification, and sanctification with moral renewal; but he also goes in the opposite direction. In the Large Catechism, he describes the whole work of the Spirit as sanctification.² Elsewhere, he seems to equate purity with holiness. Yet, despite all this, a remarkably consistent, Biblical understanding of sanctification emerges from the study of his writings. Like most of his work, it needs to be understood within its own Biblical frame of reference.

Luther's teaching on holiness was first forged in his opposition to the cult of the saints and the use of relics as holy things, objects that communicated holiness. It was later developed more fully in the debates with his Roman opponents on the nature of the church, the sacraments, and the ministry. Since his opponents were so steeped in the language of holiness that they could not appreciate Luther within his forensic frame of reference, the mature Luther, it seems, attempted to put his case in their terms. He explicated his own understanding of God's holiness in contrast with what he regarded as the prevailing views of his day. In this explication he emphasized God's gift of holiness by distinguishing the passive holiness of the faithful as recipients of it from their active holiness as co-workers with God.

As far as I can ascertain, remarkably little has been written about Luther's doctrine of

¹ See, for example, the discussion on sanctification in the Formula of Concord (*The Book of Concord*, translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), pp. 542-547.

² "The Large Catechism," 2:3:35-62 (*The Book of Concord*, pp. 415-421).

passive holiness.³ My own study of his teaching on holiness has been sharpened by my work at a commentary on Leviticus.⁴ I am convinced that the subject is not just a matter of historical and academic interest; it touches on some of the concerns of the charismatic movement, clarifies many aspects of the Lutheran tradition of worship, explains its ecumenical stance with other denominations, and throws light on the role of the pastoral ministry.

1. The Nature and Source of Holiness

Luther is quite emphatic that God alone is intrinsically holy. All other holiness is derived from him. Apart from him, nothing is ever holy.⁵ Luther does not, however, merely take the Bible's reference to God's holiness as a description of his being, his divinity. Since God is holy, he makes us holy.⁶ Thus God is not holy because he keeps himself aloof from the world and separate from sinners. On the contrary, Luther argues from Christ's own genealogy: "True holiness, the holier it is, the nearer it draws to sinners."⁷ The Lord God was called the holy One of Israel, because he chose and sanctified Israel for the true worship of him.⁸ His presence makes his people holy.⁹ God is therefore called holy "on the basis of what he effects."¹⁰ When we sing the *Sanctus*, we confess that "all holiness in the whole earth must be ascribed to God alone."¹¹ Human beings cannot produce holiness for themselves; they must receive it entirely from God. It therefore follows that all self-fabricated holiness is abhorrent to God, for all those who would make themselves holy act as their own gods; they seek God's glory for themselves.¹²

God's holiness is communicated by his presence, and that presence is given in the divine service. This means that for Luther holiness is not a moral concept, but a liturgical reality, for true holiness comes from the true worship of the Triune God. Thus an object is holy if it is "separated from profane use and consecrated for sacred and divine service."¹³ Christians are holy, because they are separated from ordinary life and hallowed for a life of worship through their faith in Jesus. He is our Holy One, since he alone makes us holy.¹⁴ He therefore is our sanctification (1 Cor. 1:30). We are holy only

³ See Regin Prenter, "Holiness in the Lutheran Tradition," *Man's Concern with Holiness*, edited by M. Chavchavadze, London: Hodder and Stoughton, date not given, pp. 121-144; Philip Watson, "Luther and Sanctification," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 30 (1958), pp. 243-259; Elmer L Towns, "Luther on Sanctification," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 126 (1969), pp. 115-122; Jan D Kingston Siggins, "Christ our Holiness," *Martin Luther's Doctrine of Christ*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970, pp. 153-156; and Jared Wicks, "Heiliger Geist- Kirche- Heiligung. Einsichten aus Luthers Glaubensunterricht," *Catholica* 45 (1991), pp. 79-101.

⁴ John W Kleinig, *Leviticus*, Concordia Commentary, Concordia: St Louis, 2003. For a summary of the Biblical teaching on holiness, see John W Kleinig, "Sharing in God's Holiness," *Lutheran Theological Review* 7 (1995), pp. 105-118.

⁵ American Edition of *Luther's Works*, Philadelphia: Fortress, and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-, henceforth cited LW 12:325; 30:6.

⁶ LW 16:10,155; 19:115,230. As far as I know, Luther nowhere defines God's holiness as his sinlessness.

⁷ *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1912-1921, henceforth cited WA 10/3:327:24-25.

⁸ LW 16:10, 322.

⁹ LW 19:230; cf. 16:131; 18:61.

¹⁰ LW 16:10.

¹¹ LW 16:70.

¹² LW 21:329-330.

¹³ LW 14:328; cf. 12:39; 29:30.

¹⁴ LW 16:10, 131.

in him.¹⁵ Through faith in him we belong to God and share in his holiness. Here is how Luther himself explains this great truth:

Now just as God our Lord is holy, so his people are also holy. Therefore we are all holy if we walk in faith ... For he who is a Christian enters with the Lord Christ into a sharing of all his goods. Now, since Christ is holy, he, too, must be holy, or else he must deny that Christ is holy. If you have been baptised, you have put on the holy garment, which is Christ.¹⁶

We have in this the foundation of Luther's teaching on sanctification. All Christians are saints, a holy priestly people, because they have been united with their holy Lord, their great high priest, for a life of service. The holiness of the church "consists of the Word of God and true faith."¹⁷

The nature of our holiness in Christ is clarified by a very helpful and far-reaching distinction. It appears first in Luther's commentary on the Galatians from 1535. There he distinguishes between active and passive holiness.¹⁸ This is how he puts it:

We may distinguish sharply between Christian holiness and other kinds of holiness ... Christian holiness is not active but passive. Therefore let no one call himself holy on the basis of his way of life or his works... Such works, of course, are holy, and God strictly demands them of us; but they do not make us holy. You and I are holy; the church, the city, and the people are holy - not on the basis of their own holiness, but on the basis of a holiness not their own, not by an active holiness, but by a passive holiness. They are holy because they possess something that is divine and holy, namely, the calling of the ministry, the Gospel, Baptism, etc., on the basis of which they are holy.¹⁹

Our passive holiness is alien to us, part of the receptive life of faith, something received from God the Father and available to us only in Christ; it is an extrinsic heavenly saintliness that is always received and yet never possessed.²⁰ It is communicated by the spoken word of God. God gives it to those who keep on receiving it from him.²¹ Its essence is summed up in the Creed.²² Our active holiness, however, is the saintliness of good works. By sharing in Christ's holiness we who are holy by faith in him do holy work; we are holy in what we do and how we live. His holiness covers us and pervades our whole physical existence. This earthly saintliness does God's will and pleases him by keeping the Decalogue, the divinely instituted index of holiness; it also turns to God

¹⁵ LW 12:234; 14:93; 19:178; 23:330-331; 27:85.

¹⁶ LW 30:32.

¹⁷ "The Smalcald Articles," 3:12:3 (*The Book of Concord*, 315).

¹⁸ The concept of passive holiness is part of Luther's broader concept of the "passive life." It has been investigated by Christian Link, "Vita Passiva," *Evangelische Theologie* 44 (1984), pp. 315-351, Oswald Bayer, *Theologie*, Gütersloher Verlagshaus: Gütersloh, 1994, pp. 42-49, and, most comprehensively, Reinhard Huetter, *Suffering Divine Things. Theology as Church Practice*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids. Luther does not use the Latin adjective "passiva" to denote physical inertia and inactivity before God but to refer to the reception of God's activity. In his introduction to his commentary on Galatians where he distinguishes between active and passive righteousness he defines passive righteousness as "the righteousness of Christ and the Holy Spirit, which we do not perform but receive, which we do not have but accept, when God the Father grants it to us through Jesus Christ" (LW 26:6). Thus passive holiness is the holiness that we do not produce for ourselves but receive as a gift from God

¹⁹ LW 26:25. He also refers to passive holiness in 27:82 and to external or alien holiness in 12:325,328,362.

²⁰ For this and what follows, see LW 5:213-214.

²¹ "The Large Catechism," 2:52-59 (*The Book of Concord*, 417-418); LW 12:330; 41:165-166.

²² LW 5:214.

in the Lord's Prayer for help to love the neighbour as whole-heartedly as it should.²³

In his teaching on sanctification, Luther gives due weight to both passive and active holiness. He shows how the passive holiness of the Christian depends upon our ongoing reception of it in the divine service, for that is where God's holiness is given to us and received by us. Yet that does not lead to a denial of active holiness. Rather, he stresses that it is based on the passive holiness given in Christ and is energised by the Holy Spirit.

2. The Holy Things of God

The Old Testament distinguishes between the most holy things that sanctify, and what is holy from contact with them.²⁴ So, for example, the anointing oil, the meat from the sin offerings, and the bread from the grain offerings were most holy, whereas the priests who were consecrated by them were only holy in a secondary sense. The priest could not by himself sanctify anybody or anything. Rather, he administered the most holy things that God used to sanctify his people.

Luther was convinced that the church of his day had lost sight of this crucial biblical distinction. The things that were sanctified by the holy things of God, like the sacramental vessels and the monastic life, were held to have the power to sanctify.²⁵ The power ascribed to relics was a notorious instance of this general tendency. As a result, the things that actually sanctified God's people were neglected, and even despised. Much of his work, therefore, was directed at the restoration of the divinely ordained holy things to their proper place in the divine service and in Christian vocation.

Luther basically identified the holy things with what we now call the means of grace. These means of the Spirit are our *sancta*, our holy things. Through them Christians share in the holiness of Christ. This is how he puts it in his Galatians commentary:

Although the city of Rome is worse than Sodom and Gomorrah, nevertheless there remain in it Baptism, the Sacrament, the voice and text of the Gospel, the Sacred Scriptures, the ministries, the name of Christ, and the name of God ... If these are present among a people, that people is called holy. Thus this Wittenberg of ours is a holy village, and we are truly holy, because we have been baptised, communed, taught and called by God; we have the works of God among us, that is the word and the sacraments, and these make us holy.²⁶

It is noteworthy that Luther, here and elsewhere, goes beyond the means of grace in his list of the holy things. Among them he includes the offices of ministry and the name of God. Our participation in these holy things make us part of the communion of saints.²⁷

Luther's teaching on holy things is developed most carefully in his treatise *On the Councils and the Church* of 1539.²⁸ There he picks up the German word *Heiligthum*,

²³ LW 5:213-214; 41:145-148,165-167.

²⁴ See Exod 29:37; 30:22-29; Lev 7:14-18,27.

²⁵ See LW 41:167-175.

²⁶ LW 26:24-25; cf. 24:168-169.

²⁷ It seems that Luther construed the Latin genitive plural in the phrase: *communio sanctorum* from the Apostles Creed both as neuter (holy things) and as masculine (holy people). Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, translated by Robert C Schultz, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966, summarizes the case well on pp. 294-313.

²⁸ LW 41:9-178. Part III deals with this from pp. 143-178.

the common term for a sacred relic as well as the word for a holy place and a holy thing. He uses it to describe the seven holy things of the Christian church “whereby the Holy Spirit effects in us daily sanctification and vivification in Christ, according to the first table of Moses.”²⁹ In this way he takes issue with popular piety, and with the doctrine of the seven sacraments.³⁰ These seven holy things are obviously not all the same in kind, nor are they of the same importance, but all play a vital role in the sanctification of the Christian. They constitute the “principal parts of Christian sanctification.”³¹

The first of these holy things is **the word of God**, which for Luther, the Old Testament scholar, is the most holy thing in the church. He claims:

This is the principal item, and the holiest of holy possessions, by reason of which the Christian people are called holy; for God's word is holy and sanctifies everything it touches ... the Holy Spirit himself administers it and anoints or sanctifies the Christian Church with it.³²

God's word, then, is the holy chrism, the most holy oil that anoints his people with the Holy Spirit.³³ Wherever God's word “is taught, preached, heard, read, or pondered, there the person, the day, and the work are sanctified by it”.³¹ That includes Baptism and the Lord's Supper, for they too are sanctified by the word of Christ.³⁴ The sanctifying word does not consist of odd words, phrases, or sentences uttered by Christ, but includes the “entire sermon” of Christ's life, work, and passion.³⁵ It sanctifies people wherever it is publicly preached, heartily believed, openly professed, and faithfully lived. Indeed, nothing is holy apart from the word of God. It is the elixir of holiness, for “God's word is holy and sanctifies everything connected with it and involved in it.”³⁶

The second holy thing is **the sacrament of baptism**. Wherever it is “taught, believed, and administered correctly according to Christ's ordinance,” there people are cleansed and sanctified by the Holy Spirit.³⁷ In baptism, Christians are marked with the holy blood of Christ; by faith they are daily bathed in Christ's baptism, and so share in his holiness.³⁸ By its power they are consecrated as priests for divine service.³⁹ Every baptised believer is therefore holy in Christ. Luther says:

A Christian is holy in body and soul, whether he be layman or priest, man or woman. If anybody denies that, he speaks blasphemy against holy baptism.⁴⁰

²⁹ LW 166:166.

³⁰ This comes out clearly at the close of his discussion on the seven holy things. There he says: “I would even call these seven parts the seven sacraments, but since that term has been misused by the papists and is used in a different sense in Scripture, I shall let them stand as the seven principal parts of Christian sanctification” (LW 41:166).

³¹ LW 41:166.

³² LW 41:149; cf. 5:313314; 37:365. The priority of the word is connected with the importance of faith in sanctification in “The Large Catechism,” 1:3:92 (*The Book of Concord*, p. 377); cf. LW 43: 202. Where faith has not been created by the hearing of the word, the holy things do not sanctify.

³³ This is an allusion to the most holy anointing oil in the Old Testament which was used to consecrate the tabernacle and its furnishings as well the priests (Exod 30:22-33; cf. Exod 29:7,21,36; 31:11; 35:8,15,28; 37:29; 40:9-15; Lev 8:2,10,12,30; 10:7; 21:10,12; Num 4:16; 35:25).

³⁴ LW 35:365; 36:244-245.

³⁵ LW 24:211.

³⁶ LW 37:385.

³⁷ LW 41:151.

³⁸ LW 23:331,335.

³⁹ LW 38:185, 187-189, 208; cf. 31:353-355.

⁴⁰ LW 36:245.

The third holy thing is **the sacrament of the altar**. Wherever Christ's body and blood are “rightly administered, believed, and received,” there a person is sanctified wholly in body and soul.⁴¹ In the Lord's Supper, Christ's holy body is a food with a reverse effect. It transforms those who eat it into what it is itself, and gives them the Holy Spirit. Our bodies are therefore made holy by Christ's body and so are destined for eternal life.⁴²

The fourth holy thing is the **office of the keys**. Its purpose is the maintenance rather than administration of holiness, for it guards against the desecration of the holy things and the contamination of the holy Christian Church. By the declaration of forgiveness in the absolution, the Holy Spirit sanctifies fallen Christians who trust that they are redeemed by Christ's death. They are thereby restored to the holy worship and fellowship of God's people. But “those who refuse to be converted or sanctified again” are excluded from God's holiness by means of the keys and cast out from God's holy people.⁴³ By the positive and negative use of the keys, the church maintains its God-given holiness in an unclean world. This office then protects the sanctity of the means of grace and their use in the divine service.

The fifth holy thing is the **office of the ministry**.⁴⁴ The ministry differs in its sanctity from the first four holy things in that it does not itself sanctify, but rather administers those things that sanctify. The church sets aside certain men, as Christ has directed, and consecrates them to have responsibility for the holy things of God. Ordination is, in fact, a second consecration after baptism.⁴⁵ In the rite of ordination candidates for the holy ministry are not consecrated with holy oil, like the priests in Israel, but by God's word, which anoints him with the Holy Spirit.⁴⁶ Pastors, in turn, consecrate God's people through the enactment of his word in the ministry of the gospel. Wherever this is done according to the institution of Christ, there the holy people of God are to be found, for, only if the holy things of God are made available to people, can the saints on earth keep on receiving his holiness.

The sixth holy thing is **prayer**.⁴⁷ By this Luther understands both the public liturgy and personal devotions. Luther rests his case on 1 Timothy 4:5. There St Paul maintains that every good thing created by God is sanctified by the word of God and prayer. Elsewhere he draws on those passages from the Old Testament which maintain that the holy name of God sanctifies those who invoke it,⁴⁸ for just as the Triune name is holy, so, if it touches the heart and the mouth, it makes that person entirely holy.⁴⁹ Since Christians have been baptised into the Triune name, God's name has been given to them as his children. It hallows them when they use it rightly.⁵⁰ It is “our greatest treasure and the most holy thing we have,” because it gives us access to God and his holiness in prayer.⁵¹ When Luther speaks of prayer, he does not just think of singing and saying the Lord's

⁴¹ LW 41:152.

⁴² LW 37:99-101; cf. 37:237.

⁴³ LW 41:153.

⁴⁴ LW 41:154.

⁴⁵ LW 53:124, note 4; cf. 38:186,194,195,211,214.

⁴⁶ LW 38:185-6,195,213.

⁴⁷ LW 41:164.

⁴⁸ LW 11:382.

⁴⁹ LW 42:28; cf. 13:384.

⁵⁰ LW 27:221.

⁵¹ “The Large Catechism,” 3:38 (*The Book of Concord*, p. 425).

Prayer, the psalms, and doctrinally sound hymns; he also includes meditation on them and on the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Catechism. They too are “God’s word and belong to the holy possession (*Heiligthum*) whereby the Holy Spirit sanctifies the holy people of Christ.”⁵² He therefore links the catechism with sanctification, for it was to be used as a prayer-book for reflection, thanksgiving, self-examination, and petition.⁵³

Our final holy treasure is **the holy cross**.⁵⁴ By the cross Luther means all kinds of suffering. In a sense, it is not a new holy thing, but rather indicates the circumstances in which the holy things of God take their full effect in human existence. A kind of suffering lies behind the other six holy things, because they are all the means by which the people of God undergo and so suffer sanctification in Christ. This receptive passivity culminates in suffering for Christ’s sake in the world. Such suffering promotes sanctification. The most extensive treatment of this is found in Luther’s tract on the *Fourteen Consolations* from 1520.⁵⁵ There he reflects on Hebrews 12:4-11. The gist of his argument is that, by the touch of his holy flesh and the washing of his holy blood, Christ has baptised and so consecrated all pain and all the evils of this world. Hence, for those who are in Christ, their endurance of suffering brings with it sanctification.⁵⁶ This applies both to suffering for sin and to suffering for righteousness. On the one hand, if Christians patiently suffer for their sins and admit they do so deservedly, they become as holy as the thief at the right hand of Jesus on the cross and so suffer in innocence.⁵⁷ On the other hand, all Christians suffer innocently for Christ and his word in an evil world, for evil people prevent them from performing their vocation within the three divinely instituted holy orders, the home, the civil government, and the church; they make it hard for them to serve as his holy priesthood in their particular station. Both kinds of suffering sanctify the saints by mortifying the old Adam, teaching reliance on Christ’s holiness, and uniting them with the communion of saints in their suffering. The suffering of the faithful, then, is a far holier treasure than any religious relic, for Christ has sanctified it by his suffering. He therefore sanctifies them through it, so that they become more and more like their master.

These seven holy things convey the holiness of Christ to the people of God. They make and keep them holy in Christ. Apart from them, there is no human holiness. They establish and uphold the holiness of the Christian church. They alone determine what is holy or common, clean or unclean.

3. The Realms of Holiness and Impurity

According to the Old Testament, the presence of a holy God with his people created a sphere of holiness in contradistinction to the sphere of impurity. Between them lay the common domain that could be defiled and drawn into the realm of impurity, or else cleansed and drawn into the realm of God’s holiness. That common domain was the natural, secular world, the order of creation. It did not yet belong completely to either

⁵² LW 41:164. While the Creed had to do with Christ’s heavenly holiness, the Decalogue and the Lord’s Prayer had to do with our earthly active holiness (LW 5:313-314; WA 50:626.19-627.12).

⁵³ LW 43:200.

⁵⁴ LW 41:164-165.

⁵⁵ LW 42:121-166. See especially 137-144.

⁵⁶ LW 42:141-144; cf. WA 5:619:14; LW 51:207-208.

⁵⁷ LW 42:140.

realm, but was influenced by both of them.

In the judgment of some scholars, Luther is supposed to have abolished the distinction between the sacred and the profane.⁵⁸ But that seems to me to rest upon a misreading of his theology. He did something much more radical than that. He redefined Christian holiness and purity, personally and christologically, in the light of his distinction between law and gospel.⁵⁹ This synthesis is presented most graphically in two texts, the lectures on Psalm 51 from 1532 and the second sermon at Torgau on the second article of the Creed from 1533.⁶⁰

As early as the lectures on Hebrews from 1517-1518 Luther had distinguished the purity of the New Testament rather sharply from the purity of the Old Testament. While the purity of the Israelites, which lay in the flesh, was produced by the observance of the law, Christian purity, which lay in the conscience, was given by Christ and received by faith in the gospel.⁶¹

In his lectures on Psalm 51 Luther equates the purity of the Christian believers with their righteousness before God the Father. He maintains that “this purity is an alien purity, for Christ adorns and clothes us with His own righteousness.”⁶² Those who hear and believe the gospel are sprinkled with the most pure blood of Christ in baptism and the Lord’s Supper; they are washed and cleansed in body and spirit by the blood of Christ.⁶³ Since they are dressed in Christ’s purity, they have access to God’s sanctifying Spirit and share in his holiness. Thus the states of purity and holiness are no longer understood locally as they were in the Old Testament but personally in relation to Christ. So if you consider people as they are in themselves apart from Christ, you will not find any purity in them but only “diabolical blackness.”⁶⁴ But if you look at them as they are in Christ they are covered by his purity. Luther says:

According to this purity, which in spirit and faith we have in Christ and from the Sacraments that He instituted, the Christian is rightly said to be purer than snow, purer than the sun and the stars, even though the defilements of spirit and flesh cling to him. These are concealed and covered by the cleanness and purity of Christ, which we obtain by hearing the Word and by faith.⁶⁵

Christians therefore reside in two realms; they occupy two states of being. On the one

⁵⁸ See, for example, Hans J Iwand, "Luthers Theologie," *Nachgelassene Werke*, vol 5 Munich: Kaiser, 1974, p. 153. The ambiguity of the term “profane” creates problems for the modern reader. On the one hand, it may refer to something that is not sacred but in common use, something that belongs to the natural world outside the sanctuary. On the other hand, it may also refer to something holy that has been abused, like God’s name in swearing, or something common and clean that has been defiled, like the sexuality of a woman who has been raped. It is therefore best to use the term “common” instead to describe what belongs to the order of creation. Such common things can either be sanctified for divine use or defiled by abuse.

⁵⁹ In his commentary on Psalm 51 he defines the holiness of a Christian in these philosophical terms: “Thus a Christian is not intrinsically and formally holy. His holiness does not lie in the predication of substance but in the predication of a relationship; it is a matter of gratuitous mercy” (WA 40/2:354:2-4; my own translation since this is misconstrued in LW 12, 329).

⁶⁰ WA 37:53:13-62:19

⁶¹ LW 29:209-211.

⁶² LW 12:367.

⁶³ LW 12:363, 366-367. This alludes to the application of blood in Exodus 29:20 and Leviticus 8:23-24 to Aaron and his sons to purify them before their consecration as priests.

⁶⁴ LW 12:367.

⁶⁵ LW 12, 366-367.

hand, in the body they live common lives governed by God's law together with all other sinners in the order of creation. On the other hand, they have a pure conscience and live holy lives by faith in Christ together with all the saints and angels in the Father's presence.

In his second Torgau sermon Luther developed his understanding of the relationship between purity and holiness christologically in connection with the incarnation of our Lord. Since the whole of humanity has been thoroughly tainted by original sin, its impurity pervades the whole human passage through life, from conception to burial.⁶⁶ God's Son therefore entered this contaminated world to sanctify the entire human lifecycle from the womb to the tomb.⁶⁷ He walked down the same road that we do, but with a difference. He purified and sanctified everything that he touched with his most holy human body.⁶⁸ He consecrated his human body as the only safe sanctuary (*Heiligthum*) for fallen sinners,⁶⁹ turning it into a new pure, holy habitat for human existence.⁷⁰ Those who enter Christ's body are purified in it by his alien purity, and consecrated by his alien holiness. For them, the whole world - and the whole passage from conception to burial in the grave - is holy ground. There is then nothing unclean for the saints, nothing harmful to their sacral status, in the whole of God's creation; everything contributes to their sanctification in Christ. They live their earthly lives in Christ's holy body, a far holier place than any monastery or any place of pilgrimage.⁷¹

Even though Luther held that Christ had sanctified our bodily life by his incarnation, he did not conclude that everybody in the world had therefore become holy. What Christ won for humanity by his life, death, resurrection and ascension he now delivers to the faithful through the ministry of the gospel in the church.⁷² Only those who are in the body of Christ, those who have faith in him, inhabit that holy sphere where they are holy and everything they do is holy service of God.⁷³ Since unbelievers do not have faith in Christ they remain in a state of spiritual impurity. No matter how moral and righteous they may be they do not share in the alien purity and holiness of Christ. Since they are not located with Christ in the Father's sanctifying presence their whole existence is still beset with impurity.

Despite his strong emphasis on original sin and its impurity Luther did not hold that the common realm was ruled by Satan. Rather Satan contested and undermined Christ's rule in it. By virtue of his exaltation Christ ruled over the world with God's law as well as over the church with the gospel. In his doctrine of the two kingdoms, Luther clearly differentiates between the sacred environment of the church which is constituted by the gospel, God's right hand kingdom, and the common environment of the world, God's left hand kingdom, which is constituted by God's law.⁷⁴ Just as there are two kinds of

⁶⁶ WA 37:56:11-41.

⁶⁷ WA 37:53:20-24.

⁶⁸ WA 37:57:151-152; 59:1-25; 61:34-62:20; cf. LW 52:5.

⁶⁹ WA 37:57:20; 60:26; 61:12,18-19,36,38.

⁷⁰ For the importance of location in Luther's theology, see John W Kleinig, "Where Is Your God? Luther on God's Self- Localisation," pp. 117-131 in *All Theology is Christology. Essays in Honor of David P Scaer*, edited by Dean O Wenthe and others, Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Press, 2000.

⁷¹ WA 37:61.

⁷² "The Large Catechism," 2:38-39 (*The Book of Concord*, pp. 415-416).

⁷³ LW 28:35; 37:364-365; WA 37:57:22-23, 33-37; 61:19.

⁷⁴ LW 45:88-93. See the discussion on this by Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, translated by Robert C Schultz, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972, pp. 43-82, as well as the useful suggestion by Ragnar

righteousness that belong to these two spheres, one earthly and the other heavenly,⁷⁵ so there are also two kinds of purity, one divine and liturgical, and the other human and civil. Christians inhabit both spheres. Since they are completely holy in Christ, they do holy work in their God-given station and vocation.⁷⁶ Yet they still remain unclean in their old self until they die.⁷⁷ Their whole life on earth is a process of purification.⁷⁸ Unbelievers, however, live only in the common domain, God's left hand kingdom, the realm of the law where there is no spiritual purity, no purity of the heart and a good conscience. Yet they are not entirely given over to impurity, since, as long as they live by God's law and lead moral lives, they still enjoy the natural common blessings of creation.

Luther did not abolish the distinctions between the sacred and the common, the clean and the unclean. Rather, he redefined them from his central insight into the relationship between law and gospel. Within the church, the body of Christ, lay the heavenly sphere of holiness which was ruled by the gospel. Apart from the church lay the common earthly realm. In it the created order, established and maintained by God's law, was attacked and disordered by the power of impurity, the rebellious dominion of Satan. Thus we have three domains.

- a. God's right hand kingdom under Christ's rule with the gospel
 - The holy domain: spiritual purity: church: order of redemption
- b. God's left hand kingdom under Christ's rule with the law
 - The common domain: natural and moral purity: natural world: order of creation
 - The unclean domain: spiritual and moral impurity: disordered world: dominion of Satan

4. The Purity and Desecration of the Holy Things

Biblically speaking, there are two dangers associated with the use of the holy things. On the one hand, they can be desecrated by being used in a secular way for common purposes. On the other hand, they can be defiled by contact with something unclean.⁷⁹ As a result of desecration, the holy things of God no longer admit people to God's gracious presence, nor do they communicate his life-giving holiness to them. As a result of defilement, they cease to operate in grace; instead, they unleash God's wrath on the

Bring, "Der Glaube und Recht nach Luther," in *Gedenkschrift für D. Werner Elert*, edited by Friedrich Hübner, Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1955, p. 152, that Luther in fact posits three realms (*Herrschaftsbereichen*): the holy realm of God's presence in the church, the secular world of man, and the evil domain of Satan. Bring's suggestion is taken up and developed further by Lennart Pinomaa, *Sieg des Glaubens*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1964, p. 177. He prefers the term "Machtbereichen," spheres of influence or power.

⁷⁵ See LW 26:4-12.

⁷⁶ See LW 37:364-365. Luther's teaching on the three holy orders of the ministry, the family and government fits in here. The same word of God that institutes these holy orders sanctifies the work of believers in these orders. See the discussion on this by Oswald Bayer, "Nature and Institution: Luther's Doctrine of the Three Orders," *Lutheran Quarterly* 12 (1998), pp. 125-159, and by Bernd Wannewetsch, "Luther's Moral Theology," *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, edited by Donald K McKim, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 120-135.

⁷⁷ "The Large Catechism," 2:57-58 (*The Book of Concord*, p. 418).

⁷⁸ WA 10,1/1:52:11-14.

⁷⁹ In LW 26:25 Luther observes that the holy things of God, such as his word, Christ's name and baptism cannot be defiled in God's sight by human character and behaviour; they can only be defiled in the sight of the Gentiles. Thus "they remain holy and exactly what they were, regardless of whether they are among the godly or the ungodly; men can neither defile them nor hallow them."

unclean person or thing.

As far as I can gather, Luther developed his understanding of desecration most fully in the treatise on *The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests* from 1533.⁸⁰ In it Luther accused the bishops and priests of sacrilege in the temple of God. Even though the clergy had preserved six holy things in the church, they had desecrated them by abuse and had thereby hindered their proper operation.⁸¹

Six holy things were desecrated by false teaching and pastoral maladministration.⁸² The Sacrament of the Altar was desecrated by the sale of private masses, the practice of communion in one kind, the teaching of it as a sacrifice that was offered to God by the priests, and the belief in it as a good work that merited God's grace. Baptism was desecrated by the lack of preaching on Christ and the gospel. The sermon was desecrated by preaching on other things rather than the text of the Gospel for the day. The holy ministry was desecrated by the abuse of the Sacrament of the Altar, together with the other holy things, and the teaching that ordination gave the priests the power to produce the holy things of God. As a result of these abuses, the keys and prayer too were desecrated. Luther, however, did not elaborate on these, as he had run out of steam.⁸³

Luther sums up his teaching on the sanctity of the holy things with two simple propositions:

Where the gospel is rightly and purely preached, there a holy Christian Church must be....where there is a holy Christian Church, there all the sacraments, Christ himself, and the Holy Spirit must be.⁸⁴

The presence or absence of the gospel in the divine service therefore determines whether the holy things are kept holy, or whether sacrilege occurs. The worst kind of sacrilege is the desecration of God's word by false teaching and malpractice. Where the word is kept pure and holy, there Christians are kept holy by their faithful participation in Christ's holiness through the holy things of God.

This understanding of desecration leads to Luther's emphasis on the purity of doctrine, which he equates with the purity of the gospel.⁸⁵ This is how he explains it in a sermon on 1 Corinthians 1:4-9:

If we have the gospel pure, we have the treasure God gives his Church and we cannot go astray or want...There is no defect in this, and it is effective and fruitful. The fact that some do not believe, does not weaken baptism or the Gospel or the Church; they harm themselves.... Wherever the doctrine is pure, there you can also keep purity in baptism, the sacrament, absolution, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, good works and all callings.⁸⁶

⁸⁰ LW 38:147-214, especially 174-212.

⁸¹ LW 38:177-178.

⁸² LW 38:180-213.

⁸³ LW 38:211.

⁸⁴ LW 38:211; cf. 52:18.

⁸⁵ LW 12:407. See Gunnar Wertelius, *Oratio Continua*, Lund: Gleerup, 1970, pp. 339-345, for a discussion on Luther's understanding of pure doctrine. Luther uses the terms pure doctrine (*doctrina pura*) and sound doctrine (*doctrina sana*) interchangeably, because pure doctrine leads to a sound healthy faith in Jesus Christ.

⁸⁶ Luther's *Epistle Sermons*, vol. 11, translated by John N Lenker, Minneapolis: Luther, 1909, p. 301.

Just as the sanctity of the holy things depends on the power of God's word, so their effectiveness rests on whether the gospel is taught in its purity.

Luther's concern for the purity of doctrine comes from his understanding of participation in Christ's holiness through the use of the holy things. The evangelical preaching of Christ enables people to put their trust in his holiness and serve him with pure hearts. Pure doctrine produces a pure faith, a pure conscience, and the pure worship of God.⁸⁷ Through purity of evangelical teaching God's pure word cleanses the faithful with the alien purity of Christ.⁸⁸ And that, in turn, promotes a life of active holiness in the world. Pure doctrine, therefore, which attaches people to the purity of Christ, has priority over purity of life.⁸⁹

While human beings cannot desecrate Christ's holiness and destroy the sanctity of God's word, they can pollute his holy things by their teaching and so nullify their sanctifying power by hampering faith in Christ. Through false teaching and liturgical malpractice, the holy things of God, like the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper, are turned into sacrilegious instruments for self-sanctification. People are then trapped in the darkness of their own impurity, from which they cannot free themselves, no matter how hard they try. This contamination of holy things through false teaching occurs objectively through their wrong administration in the divine service, and subjectively through the operation of misbelief in the heart of the person. Thus, through impurity of unevangelical doctrine and malpractice, people are deprived of the sanctification that is offered to them in the holy things of God.

Conclusion

Luther nowhere systematises his teaching on holiness. Yet it is still remarkably consistent and well-developed. The emphasis in it lies on participation in God's holiness through faith in Christ. God makes and keeps the church holy through the seven holy things that he has entrusted to it for its sanctification. These sanctify those who believe the gospel and participate in the divine service together with the whole communion of saints. They receive the holiness of Christ passively by their faith in him and their membership in the one holy catholic church. The active holiness of the Christian life is the fruit of this passive holiness. It issues in the keeping of the Ten Commandments and the gradual separation from all moral and spiritual impurity. Since Christ is the only source of holiness and spiritual purity, the realms of holiness and impurity are defined in terms of contact or lack of contact with him and his Holy Spirit. The common domain is created and maintained by the law rather than the gospel. The pure teaching of the gospel ensures that the holy things of God are not publicly desecrated and defiled within the worship of the church.

Thus the world of all Christians is charged with God's holiness, because they are holy in Christ. Luther says:

(Christ) has purified everything with his body, so that through him nothing that belongs to our natural birth and this life damages us at all; but everything is considered to be as pure as his own (body), because through baptism and faith I

⁸⁷ WA 22:383:9ff; *Dr Martin Luthers Sämmtliche Schriften*, edited by Joh Georg Walch, St Louis: Concordia, 1897, 6:1078.

⁸⁸ LW 12:366-367; 24:211-213; cf. 12:363; 29:152.

⁸⁹ LW 27:41-42; WA 32:408:3-15; 47:489:28-490:8; 54:405:1-406:2.

have been clothed with his birth and life. Therefore everything I do is pleasing to God and is properly called holy walking, standing, eating, drinking, sleeping, and waking, etc. For each Christian everything becomes a completely holy place (*eitel Heiligthum*), even though he still lives in the flesh and is quite impure in himself; through faith, everything about him is pure. This, however, is an alien holiness and yet our own, because God wills to see nothing that we do in this life as impure in itself; but everything becomes holy, precious, and acceptable to him through this Child who makes the whole world holy through his life.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ WA 37:57:11-25. This is a revised version of the translation from Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, p. 218.