



www.PreciousHeart.net/ti

Volume 3 – 2011

**A Non-Legalistic Doctrine of Sanctification:
Christian Failure and Christian Growth**

“Gospel-Driven Sanctification”

Rev. Kenneth R. Jones

Co-host with Dr. Michael Horton, The White Horse Inn
Pastor, Glendale Baptist Church, Miami, Florida, USA¹

Since it is the purpose of this article to make a distinction between law driven and gospel driven sanctification, I think a point of clarification is in order. Ultimately any genuine sanctification is law based, in that sanctification is conformity to the law of God. Article three of the Genevan Confession (1536) says, “Because there is only one Lord and Master who has dominion over our consciences, and because His will is the only principle of all justice, we confess all our life ought to be ruled in accordance with the commandments of His holy law in which is contained all perfections of justice, and that we ought to have no other rule of good and just living, nor invent other good works to supplement it than those which are there contained, as follows: Exodus 20:2 - ‘I am the Lord thy God, who brought thee’ and so on.” The word “driven” in the title of this article is intentionally chosen rather than “based”, because I am very much aware of the confusion caused by some, who under the banner of grace make reckless claims to the effect that the law has no bearing on

¹ See office@glendalembchurch.org and kjones@glendalembchurch.org.

those who are in Christ. This has brought charges of antinomianism which is warranted in some cases. But antinomianism is not an accurate charge against the true reformed and Lutheran Doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone. The Apostle Paul in his epistle to the church in Rome anticipates such a charge as he unpacks the concept of justification apart from the works of the law. In Roman 3:31, he raises the rhetorical question “Do we then make void the law through faith?” Paul’s answer is emphatic, “certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law”. So the point is not whether or not the moral law of God is the basis of Christian sanctification, that much is clear. I will be making the case for sanctification that is law based but gospel driven. By gospel driven I mean that while the oughtness of our behavior is established in the law of God, what prompts and empowers us to do so is the gospel of grace.

I will begin with Paul’s words in Titus 2:11-12, “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age.” The context of these verses is the apostle’s exhortations for his readers to not only speak sound doctrine (2:1) but also to pursue a pattern of living consistently with the doctrines in all of their endeavors and social engagements (2:8). The logic of Paul’s appeal is summarized in v.10 “...that they (good works), may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things”. Furthermore, Paul says in v.14 “who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself his own special people, zealous for good works”. So what is it that produces this zeal for good works? This is the question that is answered in vv.11 and 12, it is the grace of God. And of course the grace of God is another way of referring to the gospel. Paul indicates that the gospel teaches (the Greek word translated here means to train, instruct or discipline) the two constituent aspects of sanctification. On the one hand it teaches to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts. And on the other hand God’s grace teaches us that we should live soberly, righteously and godly in the present age. Question 88 of the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) captures these two aspects of sanctification. “How many parts are there to the true repentance or

conversion of man?” The answer: “two: the dying of the old self and the birth of the new”.

Elsewhere in the New Testament this two-fold aspect of sanctification is described as “putting off the old man and putting on the new” (Eph. 4:22-24), “putting to death your members which are on the earth...” (Col. 3:5), and “...as the elect of God, holy and beloved put on tender mercies, etc...” (Col. 3:12). This putting off and putting on in which our sanctification consists is in light of the gospel indicatives. This is succinctly expressed in Colossians 3:9-10 “Do not lie to one another since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him”. This is the whole point of gospel driven sanctification; it is anchored in the indicatives of the gospel. In other words, gospel driven sanctification has as its motivation what God has given in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Roman 6 in its entirety is a good example of this, but I will cite vv. 1-14 “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of his death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For He who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him, knowing that Christ having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him. For the death that he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, he lives to God. Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore do not let sin reign in you mortal body, that you should obey its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.”

I have quoted this passage at length because it is pertinent to the argument at hand and makes a number of salient points:

- (1) By virtue of our faith in Christ and as signified by our baptism we are united to His death, burial and resurrection – vv.3-6.
- (2) This union with the death, burial and resurrection of Christ is described as resulting in 4 dimensions of freedom:
 - i. Freedom from slavery to sin v.7
 - ii. Freedom from death (the penalty of sin)
 - iii. Freedom from the law (not from its demands which have been met by Christ – whose obedience is imputed to believers- but from its threat and penalty for those who do not meet its demands) vv. 14, 23
 - iv. Freedom to live unto God and to yield our bodies as instruments of righteousness – vv. 11, 13
- (3) Paul’s exhortations for Christians to live holy lives throughout this chapter is in light of their union with Christ which is at the heart of what I mean by gospel driven sanctification.

I stated above that gospel driven sanctification is anchored in the indicatives of the gospel. Let me enlarge this concept a little in order to show the difference between gospel versus law driven sanctification Michael Horton has written, “In the Greek language we must differentiate between the indicative mood, which is declarative (simply describing a certain state of affairs), and the imperative mood, (which sets forth commands).

For example, in Romans Paul first explains who believers were in Adam and their new status in Christ (justification) and then reasons from this indicative to the imperatives as a logical conclusion.”² The logical conclusion of Paul’s indicatives is that Christians who “were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light,” (Eph. 5:8). This walking in light is not in order to gain a right

² Michael Horton, The Christian Faith - A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan)

standing before God or to earn anything from him. It is precisely because of the fact that we are light in the Lord (indicative); that we are to walk as children of light (imperative). Law driven sanctification emphasizes the imperatives of scripture not as the logical conclusion of who we are in Christ or what we possess in Him, but as a means of becoming or gaining. Horton cites Louis Berkhof, “Berkhof correctly observes that the moralism evident in the ancient church not only confused justification and sanctification but tended to separate sanctification from the work of Christ. Christ’s life, death, and resurrection were necessary for getting us back on the road to paradise, but after baptism, it was thought, one’s standing before God is always dependent on the cooperation of grace and good works.”³ Horton goes on to note “Therefore, the tendency, at least among ancient as well as medieval Christian writers, was to treat sanctification as if instead of flowing evidently out of Christ’s redeeming work and justification, it was the process of moral effort through which one hoped to attain union with Christ.”⁴ What is said here about the ancient church bears a strong resemblance to what comes out of the contemporary evangelical church. Many well intended evangelical sermons aimed at prompting the hearer to live a holy life invariably turns their gaze to the inner-self for the strength and motivation to serve God and keep His commandments. It is as if we look to Christ for our justification, but to ourselves for sanctification.

This sort of introspection was brought home to me in very clear terms in a publication that was recently sent to me. The author is clearly committed to conservative, orthodox, Calvinistic doctrine. I intentionally omit his name and the title of his book because it is not my purpose to take him to task or to criticize his position. I would simply like to make the point that even among those who are to what ever degree included in the ranks of reformed theology are prone to law driven sanctification. The writer states “our goal in this book in other words, is not to ask whether we have done enough to earn God’s love and favor. Instead, our goal is to begin learning how to look for

³ Michael Horton, The Christian Faith – A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims On the Way (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan)

⁴ Michael Horton, The Christian Faith – A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims On the Way (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan)

evidence that God has done his mighty work in our lives.” The language here is a little disturbing. The evidence of God’s mighty work is seen in the person and work of Christ. And while Christians are constantly brought under conviction for their sins, as they avail themselves to the appointed means of grace, which includes the public preaching of God’s word. The evidence of God’s mighty work in our lives, is seen first in what He has done for us in Christ. Paul’s constant exhortation is for believers to be built up in the knowledge of Christ, (Eph. 1:15-22, 3:14-21, 4:20-24; Col. 2:6-19, etc.). I offer the following quote from Baptist Theologian John Gill on sanctification “It is a good work; the efficient cause is good, God Himself; the moving cause is good, His love, grace, kindness and goodwill; the matter good, some good thing towards the Lord God of Israel; the instrumental cause or means, the good Word of God; and it is good in its effects; it makes a man a good man, and fits him for the performance of good works, and is the source of them. It is commonly called a work of grace, and with great propriety; since it flows from the free, sovereign, and abundant grace of God in Christ.”⁵ This differs from the previous quote because Gill depicts God’s mighty works in us as being evidenced in Christ.

Law driven sanctification would have the Christian look to the demands of the law for the standard and to themselves for the evidence of that standard being met. Gospel driven sanctification points to the perfect obedience of Christ as having met the law’s demand and His imputed righteousness as our acceptance and right standing before the Father. Our walk is one of grateful obedience for the riches of grace received. It is for this reason (among others) that corporate confession and absolution of sin is a critical part of the liturgy of most confessional churches. Believers in such churches are not left to themselves and how they measure up to the law for confidence that God is at work in them conforming them to the image of His Son. It is also for this reason that for reformed churches, church discipline is considered one of the marks of a true church. Gospel driven sanctification does not give license for reckless living, but it also does not seek to drive sinning saints to despair, rather it aims at their repentance by presenting their Savior in all of His

⁵ John Gills, A Body of Divinity’

mercies and merits. It may be difficult for a contemporary evangelical especially in the West; to fully grasp the nuances of gospel driven sanctification because the emphasis in Western evangelicalism is subjective, so that even public worship is all about the individual's experience and feelings, rather than what is corporately confessed and objectively announced. Gospel driven sanctification is best understood in the context of covenant and community and the objective work of Christ in our place, on our behalf, but outside of us. Our feelings and spiritual accomplishments are unreliable when we face the fullness of what the law requires. If we are honest we can't help but be discouraged, because our sins are exposed. When we look to Christ by faith our sins as well as the penalty they deserve are exposed, but the solution is also presented. The whole point of gospel driven sanctification is to take both our faith in Christ and our remaining sin seriously. Law driven sanctification leaves a person wondering if they've done enough. Gospel driven sanctification leaves a person with the fact that Christ has done all that is necessary for salvation and eternal life!



www.PreciousHeart.net/ti