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

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**Introduction**

Christianity is facing a moral collapse; particularly a collapse of sound doctrine centered in the Word of God (*sola Scriptura*). The deterioration of moral criterion has led to the whimsies arguing that there is no absolute truth. Therefore, the fundamental historical Christian doctrine of sanctification with no strings attached is watered down on the basis of the relativism of truth. Furthermore, the deconstruction of the biblical reality by human intellectualism and consumerism is becoming the order of the day; whereby the Gospel is proclaimed on the basis of what is appealing to people, rather than on the theology of the cross. Certainly, human inability to keep the Law is being shifted from depending in the atoning work of Christ on the cross to how Christians can contribute to their own sanctification.

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Moreover, diverting from and deconstructing the historical biblical teaching because of worldview's influence shapes and determines what should be regarded as reality and meaningful to someone's context. As a result, the plausibility structures of ideas and practices function as a society's roadmap with regard to what beliefs are acceptable to a certain community. This may be a tendency, but the Word of God remains supracultural because it judges and transforms human worldviews. Therefore, it is vital to maintain the historical and authoritative biblical teaching with regard to sanctification. The paper endeavours to analyze, describe and evaluate sanctification in relation to the victorious work of Christ on the Cross. It also addresses sanctification within the framework of contextualization of the Gospel grounded in God's grace (*sola gratia*).

### **What Is Sanctification?**

Sanctification derives from the Greek verb *hagiazō* which literally means making holy, consecrate and set apart, particularly for a holy purpose. This has a similar meaning with terms such as appoint, elect, and choose, where something regarded as common or ordinary is put aside for the special use to serve God alone. God is the author of sanctification because He sanctifies or declares a person, a thing, a place to be holy on the basis of His holiness (1Pet. 1:16). Sanctification is not a priority but service to God. He calls and chooses people for his glory because He works through means. It is fundamentally God's free gift to humanity. God initiates and gives it to people on account of Christ. Sanctification is the process of daily growing in holiness through faith in Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit. It should be taught and understood on the basis of God's grace without integrating it with legal demands. For the Scripture asserts that all people are sinners (Rom. 3:1 and following). There is no one who is righteous before God. As a result, we have no justifiable merit that can be presented and make God declare us holy. Gregory E. Boyd and Paul R. Eddy rightly assert:

Sanctification is nothing other than learning to live by faith that one is justified because of God's free gift in Jesus Christ. The motivation for living a sanctified life is the belief that God alone saves sinners, independent of anything the

believer can do...Sanctification is nothing over and above living out the faith that one has already been declared perfectly holy and righteous for Jesus' sake.<sup>2</sup>

Sanctification means daily belonging to God's holiness, and being united with Christ through faith (*sola fide*). It is a journey to holiness as long as Christians live in this world.

### **Justification and Sanctification**

The question of a non-legal doctrine of sanctification must be comprehended on the basis of the two Christian economic pillars: *Justification* and *Sanctification*. These are theological concepts in relation to what is saving faith, how a person attains it and become righteous in the presence of God. The Scripture says:

This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus (Rom. 3:22-24).

Paul stresses how people are put into the right relationship with God through faith in Christ. God does this to all who trust him. As a result, a person is acquitted before God through faith because of Christ. She or he attains the righteousness and glory which comes from God. The Lutheran Confessions accentuate, 'this article about Justification by faith is the chief article in all Christian doctrine. Without this teaching no poor conscience can have any firm consolation or truly know the riches of Christ's grace.'<sup>3</sup> Justification and sanctification are monergistic because it is God alone who causes our justification and sanctifies us. God initiates and completes our sanctification. Thus, synergism is excluded and in that way the Gospel is not substituted by legal demands.

The Law does not function as a guide for the promotion of sanctification, but rather serves as a mirror showing us our sins, as a guide in regard to what we should do and not do in order to live a God-pleasing life, and as a curb, maintaining order in the world.

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<sup>2</sup> Gregory A. Boyd and Paul R. Reddy, *Across the Spectrum: Understanding Issues in Evangelical Theology* (Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2002), 147.

<sup>3</sup> William Herman Theodore Dau and Gerhard Friedrich Bente, trans., *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), Formula, Solid Declaration, Article III), 6.

Sanctification defines Christ's life and then our life in union with Him. Therefore, a non-legal doctrine of sanctification is drawn from Christ's incarnation and atonement. Nevertheless, our good works are our ethical requirements as fruits of faith for being one with Christ. Human beings are justified freely in such a way that any human contribution toward being put into the right relationship with God is discarded (Phil. 3:9). Christians should maintain that we cannot become holy of ourselves. But we should know and daily grow in despair of ourselves with regard to worthiness before God and rely on his grace and firmly believe that we are granted his holiness because of Christ. This implies that Christian holiness is passive and not active. We have the imputed holiness which is not the result of our actions or legal demands, but comes through the merit of Christ. It is a failure to cling on active righteousness instead of the passive one. Righteousness comes outside of ourselves therefore, it is foreign to us in such a way that we even tried to replace it with human laws. Righteousness before God does not demand doing this and that but only believing that God has done it all through his Son. He does not sanctify us on the basis of our own homemade comfortable sanctification. God provides Christians with righteousness, justification and sanctification because of His grace.

Paul's analogy of acquittal is that of a court of law, however, it is not an ethical term since it points up that God declares people not guilty in his presence. This makes all who believe in him to be his people. Paul also defines the old and new state of humanity: "And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1Cor. 6:11)." The new-self concerns the work of God done in us. "You were washed," makes the reference to baptism. "You were sanctified," indicates that God claims us to be his. And "you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ." This means that we have entered into the new relationship with God through the victory cry of Christ on the cross, "and by the Spirit of our God," the Spirit cleanses us from sin and calls us into God's holiness.

Although we are both sinners and saints, God declares us righteous and holy because of the atoning work of Jesus. The unconditional promise of God concerning righteousness and holiness

to sinners has nothing to do with legal demands. When we are saved, it is by means of grace and when we are acquitted from guilt, it is through Christ. Therefore, sanctification should remain pure without making it obligatory in the sense of validating it with human contributions. Christians share in the sanctification of Christ, as He says: “For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified (Jn. 17:19). The human nature is sanctified in Jesus, so that whoever trusts in him may have union with the Lord by faith. This points up that the sacrifice of Christ is perfect and complete to sanctify us. Therefore, definitive sanctification requires no further continuation of sacrifices and rituals (Heb. 10:14). Christ alone makes perfect our sanctification and guarantees it. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the Christian struggle against sin is over, that is why St. Paul speaks of the two selves of Christians, that is, old self and new self (Rom. 6-8). Martin Luther’s expression also stresses this fact of “*simul peccato et justus* – at the same time sinner and righteous.” The new self is the continuation of growing in faith by the help of the Holy Spirit who calls Christians to God’s community.

Ethical moral standards are needed for the sake of living a life-pleasing to God. Christians are called to be light of the world and good works glorify the Father (Matt. 5:14-16). But in no way works make us acceptable to God, neither by observing the Law (Rom. 3:28; Gal. 2:16). David J. Valleskey highlights the objective justification that entails no human contribution, but depends only on God’s *sola gratia*. No percentage of human merits is required for our justification.<sup>4</sup> Let me stress that no matter how beautiful are our cultures and worldviews are, they contribute nothing to our acquittal and salvation before God. Any subjective justification separated from the objective justification Christ won on the cross is un-Scriptural, because it is based on human feelings and experiences rather than in the saving faith through Christ.

Johannes Nissen summarizes the central pillars of mission outlined in Romans: “God’s grace is the foundation of mission; faith is the only fundamental demand, and this faith is based upon a gift

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<sup>4</sup> David J. Valleskey, *We Believe Therefore We Speak* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Northwestern Publishing House, 19995), 72-73.

which is called the justification.”<sup>5</sup> The doctrine of justification calls all nations to be passive in the sense of suspending all human efforts to reach God and active in the sense of receiving gifts from God. Carl E. Braaten writes: “Justification is a description of the pardoning heart of God reaching out to meet sinners with free and undeserved grace.”<sup>6</sup> Braaten stresses that God’s justification and forgiveness does not depend on human achievement but only on his unconditional grace.

The identity of the new self is in the union with Christ irrespective of our cultural diversity. Gene Edward Veith, Jr. stresses that the true Christian’s self is in Jesus irrespective of social position, culture, race, gender, etc.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the supraculture concept affirms that the Gospel is not and shall never be a guest of any culture because it judges and redeems culture. Nicholls states that: “By supracultural we mean the phenomena of cultural belief and behavior that have their source outside of human culture.”<sup>8</sup> Hesselgrave too defines supraculture as anything that has its source outside of culture.<sup>9</sup> Dr. C. F. W. Walther comments on the Gospel saying: “It promises us the grace of God and salvation without any condition whatsoever. It is a promise of free grace. It asks nothing of us but this, ‘Take what I give, and you have it.’”<sup>10</sup> Walther underscores that the Gospel is an unconditional promise dependent only on grace. It offers no threats at all but only consolations. The Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord distinguishes between the broad and narrow senses of the term Gospel. The broader sense refers both to the preaching of

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<sup>5</sup> Johannes Nissen, *New Testament and Mission: Historical and Hermeneutical Perspective*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Frankfurt, Germany: Peter Lang, 2007), 102.

<sup>6</sup> Carl E. Braaten, *Justification: The Article by which the Church Stands or Falls* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1990), 24.

<sup>7</sup> Gene Edward Veith Jr., *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture*, (Crossway Books, Good News Publishers, Illinois, 1994), 87-88.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce J. Nicholls, “Towards a Theology of Gospel and Culture” In *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture*, Ibid., 13.

<sup>9</sup> David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 103.

<sup>10</sup> C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1929, 1986), 10.

repentance and forgiveness of sins, whereas the narrow sense accentuates the proclamation only of God's grace. The Gospel, therefore, is defined as "a doctrine that teaches what a person should believe, so that he receives forgiveness of sins with God."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, a non-legal doctrine of sanctification is interrelated to justification in one way or the other, because the two are inseparable but can be distinguished.

### **Contextualization: Christian growth and Failure**

Contextualization is the process of relating the biblical message to the context where the Gospel is proclaimed so that it becomes rooted in people's daily lives. Contextualization must underscore that God is speaking to us in our own distinctive context. However, human circumstances and cultures must never dominate the kernel of the Gospel. The biblical message must be in dialogue with the worldview where the Word is proclaimed.

Surely, sanctification with no-strings attached should be the pillar for Christian growth in faith and doing good works, because of the redeeming work of Christ and the sanctifying Holy Spirit. Therefore, Christian failure is whereby the un-adulterated Gospel is compromised by turning what is freely given by grace into legal demands. Christian growth should be understood in the sense of maturing in faith through the means of grace that is Word and Sacraments. Nothing can substitute what God has declared to be the *modus operandi* for our salvation. Certainly, Christian criteria for growing or failing should be drawn from the Word itself. We cannot mature in faith if we discard the means of grace and disobey the Gospel. Spiritual growth is crucial for Christians because our sanctification does not count on growing in numbers but in faith. The Word comes from outside of humanity and is effective to transform human lives. However, the human part in sanctification requires faith and obedience, not as legal demands but as a way of responding to the communicated Gospel. Furthermore, Christian growth must be active in the sense of receiving from God, and be passive in the way of

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<sup>11</sup> Formula or Concord, Solid Declaration, Article V, The Law and the Gospel, paragraph 20.

contributing to sanctification. Because it is the work of the Holy Spirit that can never be substituted.

Faith is required (Acts 26:18; Heb 11:6), although it is not the work of human being but God. Obedience is also expected from Christians (1Pet. 1:20-22). This accentuates that the biblical message communicated to people must be Christocentric rather than be modified by human intellectualism and meeting the demands of consumerism. Lesslie Newbigin asserts: “What comes home to the heart of the hearer must really be the gospel, and not a product shaped by the mind of the hearer.”<sup>12</sup> One cannot ignore the influence of context when communicating the Gospel because it is the very context that may provide bridges or barriers for conveying the biblical message to people. Contextualization aims at communicating God’s Word by interacting with human cultures. It is therefore culturally conditioned, focusing on the question of how to convey God’s reality in a certain human context. The why question deals with the purpose for doing mission. Methods are an attempt to find the right way to infiltrate a particular culture or worldview through communication and contextualization. The Scriptures should determine the right method for such an operation.

It is becoming a trend that methods used for Christian growth are not drawn from the Scriptures but from one’s context. Therefore, diverse human cultures should not determine what the sound Christian growth is even failure, but the Word of God. This implies that a non-legal doctrine of sanctification is part of the *missio Dei* that should be communicated cross-culturally. Mission is contextualization of the triune God’s salvation plan into human contexts. Christ did not come into a vacuum but to a particular context; he was born and dwelt in a certain culture. He incarnated his message in the language and context of that specific culture. Therefore, contextualization is one of the pillars of mission. It is intended to provide deep roots for Christianity in a particular context. David J. Bosch argues that right from the beginning the Christian message was incarnated to a particular

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<sup>12</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 141.

context.<sup>13</sup> Sanctification with no strings attached should interact with the cultures and contexts of people who come with serious questions. Bevans notes: “Our world is not just *there*; we are involved in its construction...so our context influences the understanding of God and the expression of our faith.”<sup>14</sup> But this should not compromise the Word of God by allowing relativism of truth to diminish the sound biblical doctrine and context to forge its own theology. However, the Bible is not against human cultures but sin. It wants to transform and purify them so that cultures may be conveyers of God’s message. Such an approach makes Christianity meaningful to a particular context but does not alter its fundamental message. Contextualization must underscore that God is speaking to us in our own distinctive context. Nevertheless, human circumstances and cultures must never dominate the Gospel even the a non-legal doctrine of sanctification. We must study the Word of God carefully and respond to culture, worldview or daily challenges in light of what is taught in the Scriptures.

Flexibility in the communication of the Gospel in sundry contexts should be part of Christian growth. A context is viewed through the lenses of the Bible for evaluation and transformation. Such a *modus operandi* shows sensitivity to the cultures of those to whom the Gospel is proclaimed. This stresses that sanctification is not a priority for Christians but service to God. As Larkin writes:

Christians, because they desire to evangelize all people and because their basic identity now is in Christ, can encounter almost any culture, participate in it, and seek to identify with persons in it (1Cor. 9:19-22). Such identification, though genuine, must also be limited for those two reasons. Their purpose is the same as Paul’s, who says he can identify with all sorts of people for the purpose of rescuing them out of the kingdom of darkness and winning them as subjects for Jesus Christ in the kingdom of light (Acts 26: 18; 1Cor. 9: 22; Col. 1: 13).<sup>15</sup>

Sanctification communicated without context seems only to touch the surface, not going deeper to the allegiance of a particular worldview.

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<sup>13</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, USA: New York, 1991), 421.

<sup>14</sup> Bevans, Contextualization, 4.

<sup>15</sup> William J. Larkin Jr, *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics: Interpreting and Applying the Authoritative Word in a Relative Age* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1988), 218.

This applies to how Christians understand sanctification and live a God-pleasing life in diverse context. Andrew F. Walls expresses a similar view, underscoring that everyone in the auditorium sees the stage but no one sees it all. Culture is just a name for a location in the auditorium where Jesus acts, and the Gospel is the play. What is heard and seen is understood, shaped and influenced by where a person is sitting in the auditorium.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, human ambitions, cultures, etc, have no authority to manipulate the Word of God with the aim of either promoting Christian growth or failure.

Sanctification with no legal demands occurs in the worshiping context. It is through a contextualized worship where this doctrine is communicated either in a meaningful way according to the Word or presented contrary to the Scriptures. Nicholls writes:

Worship is the deepest expression of a religious world view, and both beauty and ugliness are invariably associated with it as in religious art, music and poetry. It is in worship that true contextualization ought to be most clearly seen, expressing the true adoration of God. At the level of moral values, contextualization of the gospel will lead to judgment and renewal of conscience as man's sensitive response to the Word of the living and dictates of his moral law.<sup>17</sup>

Worship is both vertical and horizontal in the sense that God comes to us and we share his Word and blessings in our diverse contexts. The Word represents the first horizon, and human context the second horizon. Therefore, a non-legal doctrine of sanctification is shaped by the theology from above not from below. The sound doctrine of sanctification is not communicated on a *tabula rasa* even though all theology is contextual theology but this should not overshadow the theology of the cross. God himself decided to suffer and die on the cross because of sin that his holiness demands, so that all who believe in him may be saved, sanctified and grow in holiness. Christ received the punishment demanded by God's holiness in our behalf. Thus, God makes us righteous by his grace through the redemption his Son attained for us. When Christians think that sanctification has nothing to do with justification this can cause

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<sup>16</sup> Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 44.

<sup>17</sup> Nicholls, *Contextualization: A Theology of Gospel and Culture*, 62.

spiritual achievements or pride leading to Christian failure to depend on God's grace.

The emphasis on the biblical teaching about sanctification should be at the center of daily worship according to one's context. However, if this is not properly taught it could lead to both cultural syncretism and theological syncretism. But failing to contextualize a non-legal doctrine of sanctification may make it irrelevant to a certain context. At the same time, we need to encourage the sound contextualization of this doctrine. However, we should emphasize that we contextualize the Gospel not in order to make people feel comfortable by building their own bridges to God without Christ. Rather, we contextualize so that people will understand better and believe in the Gospel because it is the power of God. Contextualization paves the way for a better understanding of how Christ sanctifies us so that people may believe in him and see the Gospel as meaningful in daily life. Sanctification without legal demands is contextualization of the triune God's salvation plan into human contexts. Because Christ did not come into a vacuum but to a particular context; he was born and dwelt in a certain culture. He incarnated his message in the language and context of that specific culture. Therefore contextualization of this doctrine is one of the pillars of mission within the Christian community and outside. In other words it should include both centripetal and centrifugal communication of the biblical message. It is intended to provide deep roots for Christian growth in a particular context without compromising the kernel of the Gospel. Therefore, culture should be used as a bridge for communicating the biblical teaching about sanctification. However, every culture needs to undergo some transformation in order to convey the Word of God. Consequently, culture should not dictate the correct interpretation of this doctrine in a particular context.

It is not sound contextualization when the reader determines from his or her own experience what should be the meaning of sanctification. Certainly, the context and cultures of the people should not overshadow God's sanctifying message in order to meet people's felt needs. Rather, the meaning of sanctification should come from an understanding of the historical and cultural context of the biblical writings. Interpreting the doctrine of sanctification out of context creates meanings based on cultural circumstances instead of the Word

of God. There is a danger of making Christianity irrelevant, particularly if uncritical contextualization is grasped as a way to please and recruit members while losing the crux of the Gospel. Contextualization must make the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ its point of departure, stressing the dwelling of the Word in a human context, so as to communicate not an abstract Gospel or sanctification, but a message concretely relevant to a particular situation. Contextualization fails if the Gospel is not communicated in such a way that people respond to the Word of God irrespective of location. The *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* rightly points up in a convincing way that:

Contextualization in mission is the effort made by a particular church to experience the gospel for its own life in light of the Word of God. In the process of contextualization the church, through the Holy Spirit, continually challenges, incorporates, and transforms elements of the culture in order to bring them under the lordship of Christ. As believers in a particular place reflect upon the Word their own thoughts, employing their own cultural gifts, they are better able to understand the gospel as incarnation.<sup>18</sup>

Contextualization properly carried out would help converts to be honest about their old religious beliefs with regard to sanctification rather than hiding them. Certainly, ordinary Christians would associate the sanctifying biblical message with themselves and live according to God's will. Contextualizing a non-legal doctrine of sanctification must underscore that God is speaking to us in our own distinctive context. We must study the Word of God carefully and respond to culture, worldview or daily challenges in light of what is taught in the Scriptures. Christian worldview is often understood as systematic or apologetic theology confronting opposing worldviews against the biblical message. Thus, the approach of such world is corrective on the basis of what is presented in the doctrine of sanctification.

### **Conclusion**

The theology of the doctrine of sanctification because of God's grace with no legal demands is central to the Christian teaching. The praxis of the church with regard to how a person is sanctified should

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<sup>18</sup> A. Scott Moreau, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 2000), 225-226.

be drawn from the Scriptures, the authoritative source. Therefore, Christians must dig deep in the Word and try to engage with the present context. We have the Gospel of God who comes down to us to sanctify us from an old life to the new life. He comes to us in the Word, in the Lord's Supper and in the water of baptism. This implies that God intervenes in our terrible sinful life in order to set us free because we cannot do anything to make our way up to him or daily grow in his holiness by our own spiritual or any achievement. Thus, a non-legal doctrine of sanctification is a gift from God through Jesus Christ, not by any work of a law. This doctrine is sometimes misinterpreted and misunderstood because of trying to avoid a so-called cheap grace and therefore burden Christians with demands of a law. Sometimes, this is done to make people feel comfortable and assured that when they contribute to holiness then their sanctification is valid. This absolutely doubts what is offered in the Gospel. It should be pointed up that, through no merit of our own; God comes down in Christ to save us from sin. He forgives our sins and sanctifies us because we cannot do it.

Christian failure depends on what a human being can do in order to please God by looking elsewhere. On the other hand, Christian growth depends on the grace of God coming in Word and Sacraments received by faith in Christ. The Word of God is valid for all times and has absolute truth irrespective of diverse worldviews.



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