



Christian Piety and Pardon: The Vindication of Post-Baptismal Sins

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Abstract

The Christian dogma of justification does not appear to adequately address the problem of post-baptismal sins. It offers no practical guidelines on how believers ought to seek or receive pardon for their post-baptismal sins. This is firstly complicated by the fact that the Bible does not seem to offer a consistent interpretation regarding the vindication of post-baptismal sins. Secondly, the apostles seem to have held different notions regarding the vindication of post-baptismal sins. And thirdly, the Christian Church is also divided in her understanding of justification and forgiveness for post-baptismal sins. This lack of consensus appears to have greatly influenced the position of early Christians and caused some divisions within the Body of Christ – Protestantism against Catholicism. This paper critically examines the vindication of post-baptismal sins in relation to the Christian directive to holiness, and advocates for a central view in which the issue of post-baptismal sins may be engaged.

Keywords: Forgiveness, Justification, Holiness, Post-baptismal sins, Christianity

Introduction

Being a Christian comes with the virtuous call to religious piety. This is the kind of call that applies to both ordinary Christians and Christian ministers alike. It entails the pardoning of sins and the justification of sinners by faith through Christ. It is also a call that guarantees the acceptance of humanity to God through the gift of salvation. However, with the call to holiness, comes the problem of iniquity. Thus, even though Christians are directed to maintain their lives by holiness, they often fall short and commit sins. Redeemed as they may be, believers continue to sin and fall short of God's command to holiness. In such cases, what should the response be, since the Bible does not seem to offer a consistent interpretation on the vindication of post baptismal sins? This paper employs the literature review method to critically examine, analyse and debate the vindication of post baptismal sins in relation to the Christian ordinance of holiness.

An appeal to holiness

The appeal to Christian piety is one of the most imperative calls of the New Testament (Baxter, 1967:13; Ryle, 1887:28). It is a fixed call, which relates to both ordinary and Christian ministers alike. To this directive, Baxter asserted that:

No subject which ever engages the thought of Christian believers can be more sacredly commanding than that of our personal holiness, by which I mean an inwrought holiness of heart and life. Beyond contradiction, this is our 'priority-number-one' concern (Baxter, 1967:13).



Endorsing the same notion, Spurgeon (1875:13) noted that whatever call a believer may pretend to have, if they have not been called to holiness, they certainly have not been called to the ministry. Thus, holiness is the central purpose of Christian election (Prior 1967:9). It is an ethical command that guides all those who profess the Christian faith (Bourdeau, 1864:4).

The call to holiness however, is not only reserved for individual believers but for the Church as well. As cited by Baxter (1967:7), Spurgeon asserted that “a holy church is an awful weapon in the hand of God”. But unfortunately, the opposite is also true, “an unholy church God will forsake until “*Ichabod*” is written over its doors” (Baxter, 1967:7). This clearly implies that God forsakes an unholy church. And, in this equation, believers are inevitably included. The church, after-all, is the union of the saints, both at the local and universal level. In that sense, God appears to be displeased by ungodliness. That is probably why the writer of Hebrews (12:14) states that “without holiness no one will see the Lord”.

With the call to holiness however, comes the problem of sin. Even though believers are admonished to exercise holiness, this imploration does not exclude the possibility of sinning. It is evident that when sinners repent and convert to Christianity, all their sins are forgiven. That is, all the sins which they had committed are cancelled and not counted against them (Pauck, 1969:125). Believers are further justified. That is, they are declared righteous on the bases of Christ’s righteousness, which is imputed on them (Johnson 2011:768). But these effectual processes do not appear to end the ability to sin (Mounce 1995:181). Rather, sin remains an impediment which believers must contend with. Therefore, they often fall short and occasionally commit sins (McQuick, 2005:194).

Acknowledging this faintness, Boettner (1932.14.127) argued that “while they (believers) may fall into sin temporarily, they will eventually return and be saved”. Again, Strong, as cited by McQuick (2005:194), stated that “the Christian is like a man making his way up hill, who occasionally slips back, yet always has his face set toward the summit. The unregenerate man has his face turned downwards, and he is slipping all the way”. On this same matter, Mounce (1995:181), citing Spurgeon, asserted that “[t]he believer, like a man on shipboard, may fall again and again on the deck, but he will never fall overboard”. These citations seem to suggest that the Christian call to holiness does not exclude the possibility of sinning. Sin remains a problem which believers must contend with.

This struggle, of remaining holy in the permanency of sin, has been implacably conveyed by Robert Murray McCheyene (1813-1843). As cited by Bonar (1960:176), Robert McCheyene declared that:

I feel, when I have sinned, an immediate reluctance to go to Christ. I am ashamed to go. I feel as if it would do no good – as if I were making Christ a minister of sin, to go straight from the swine-trough to the best robe – and a thousand other excuses; but I am persuaded they are all lies, direct from hell. John argues the opposite way – ‘If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father;’ Jeremiah 3:1 and a thousand other scriptures are against it. I am sure there is neither peace nor safety from deeper sin, but in going directly to the Lord Jesus Christ (Bonar, 1960:176).

Robert McCheyene, in this citation, appears to have reflected on the challenge which followed the Christian proposition to holiness. Due to the permanency of sin, McCheyene had to consider the possibility of forgiveness post the baptismal of believers. This is because his post-baptismal sins made him feel as if he was making Christ the minister of sin – Christ seemed to bear the burden of removing him from the swine-trough so that he may be dressed in the best of robes (Bonar 1844:189). Thus, after he was justified, and declared righteous on the bases of Christ righteousness, which was imputed on him, McCheyene found himself falling back into sin again. For this, he was ashamed and felt that it would do him no good to ask God



for forgiveness (Bonar, 1960:176). He feared that his post baptismal sins would not be forgiven against him.

But since his sins offered him neither peace nor safety, he was compelled to look directly at Christ for vindication (Bonar, 1960:176). In a sermon delivered at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in 1882, Spurgeon alluded to a similar phenomenon. He noted that “[w]hen a man’s sins are set before him in the light of God’s countenance, his first instinct is to fear that they are altogether unpardonable” (Spurgeon ser.1685, vol. 28:1). This seems to suggest that the guilt of sin, which mostly occurs post the baptismal of believers, weighs heavily on the conscience that believers often dismay that they may be forgiven. Robert McCheyene, as described by Bonar (1960:176), appears to have felt this way. He was caught between two scriptural references: 1John 2:1, and Jeremiah 3:1.

The reading of 1John 2:1 encouraged him to look to Christ for forgiveness, that God may forgive and cleanse him from all unrighteousness. But Jeremiah 3:1 destroyed any hopes of him being forgiven. Following the interpretation of 1John 2, McCheyene believed that his sins may be forgiven, so he may be restored through repentance. But in the reading of Jeremiah 3, it appeared as if no believer, who after pledging allegiance to God, may be restored after falling back into sin. In that way, McCheyene found himself confounded by scriptures. On the one hand, 1John 2 gave him hope for forgiveness; but on the other hand, Jeremiah 3 seemed to condemn him. Meanwhile, his sins offered him neither peace nor safety. He had to ease his conscience, and Christ was the possible assurance for the forgiveness of sins. In such a dilemma, he hoped that 1John 2:1 was truthful, because Jeremiah 3:1 offered him no peace.

This, in my view, is the same dilemma which believers face when sinned post their baptism. They struggle to reconcile the scriptural message of pardon against that of condemnation. For Robert McCheyene, scriptural references such as 1John 2:1 and Jeremiah 3:1 appeared to be working against each other, or at least sending mixed messages. The first gave him hope for forgiveness, but the latter seemed to condemn him. In such cases, what should the position of believers be? Are they to choose one scriptural text over the other? This however, may be characterized as selective reading, since it grants believers the freedom to choose one scriptural text over the other. In this situation therefore, does God pardon the post-baptismal sins of believers? Or are believers condemned for sinning post their baptism? These are complex but very pertinent questions. But unfortunately, there appears to be no simple answers for them.

The call to repentance and forgiveness of sins

The noticeable call to sinners for the forgiveness of sins, in light of the New Testament, begins with the prophetic ministry of John the Baptist. The Gospel of Mark (1:4), and Luke (3:3) declares that John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This implies that the act of forgiveness for sins, as understood by Jesus Christ, John the Baptist, and later the Apostles, was often preceded by the sinners’ act of repentance, which was followed by baptism (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:16; Luke 24:46-47; John 3:5, 22; Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; Acts 2:37-38). Baptism was therefore regarded as the indisputable indication of repentance, from which believers were justified with God (Kelly, 1978:193; Dallen, 1986:24; Chadwick, 1993:32).

After conversion however, the New Testament does not seem to offer a consistent interpretation regarding the forgiveness of sins, and how believers ought to be restored with God after sinning. The book of Acts, for instance, seems to suggest “that in the earliest days of the church the Apostle Peter did not know if a post-baptismal sin of attempted simony could be forgiven” (Brattston 1991:332). After seeking to buy the gift of the Holy Spirit, St. Peter declared that Simon must repent of his wickedness and pray to the Lord. “*Perhaps*” God will



forgive him for having such a thought in his heart (Acts 8:22). The use of the word “*perhaps*”, in this censure, seems to suggest that St. Peter was not sure whether Simon’s sin could be forgiven. He seems to have thought that Simon’s sin was unforgivable.

Again, since Simon sought to buy the gift of the Holy Spirit, St. Peter must have presupposed that Simon was guilty of an eternal sin (Mark 3:28-29). Against this backdrop, St. Peter’s reproach of Simon seems to have highlighted the conditional nature of forgiveness. In this condition, God is understood to forgive all sins, but not those committed against the Holy Spirit: “I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin (Mark 3:28-29). In this view, St. Peter must have assumed that Simon had blasphemed against the Holy Spirit. If that was the case, his sin was regarded as an eternal sin and therefore not forgivable.

The other thing, which resurfaces from the reading of Mark 3:28-29, is that all the sins and blasphemies of people are forgivable. But the verse does not care to indicate whether this happens in this lifetime or the next. For non-believers however, one may easily assume that this applies now, in the immediate context. Mostly because non-believers are understood to have sinned ignorantly, and may be justified under such reasons. But for believers, the case is different because the process gets more complex. This is a result of the inconsistencies that are found in the interpretations of the Apostles regarding the forgiveness of post-baptismal sins. St. Paul, for instance, seems to have strongly believed that the post-baptismal sins of believers will be forgiven on the day of the Lord (1Corinthians 5:1ff).

Nonetheless in the meantime, believers are admonished to exercise patience towards those brethren who fall into temptations (Galatians 6:1). In the case of serious sins however, such as fornication, St. Paul argued that believers must be handed over to Satan, so that their sinful nature may be destroyed (1Corinthians 5:5). Yet again, in an epistle to the Galatians (6:7-8), St. Paul pointed out that wrongdoing warrants punishment, and that this comes by the destruction of the flesh, which in turn liberates the spirit. Probably, the most revealing text which unfolds the position of St. Paul regarding this matter is 1Corinthians 3:13. In this verse, St. Paul appears to be suggesting that all the post-baptismal acts of believers (both good and bad) are not immediately rewarded, but are collected as building materials which believers use to build upon the foundation that is Christ (1Corinthians 3:11-12).

To elucidate this ideal, St. Paul employs the analogy of gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, and straw to depict the works of believers. He maintains, on the basis of these works as building materials, that they will be cast into the lake of fire to determine the reward of each believer. If these building materials are consumed by fire, believers will lose their rewards, but their souls will be spared. However, if the works survive, then believers will receive their suitable rewards reflecting their efforts (1Corinthians 3:14-15). In this narrative therefore, it appears as if St. Paul lays much emphasis to the value of progressive righteousness or holiness because the post-baptismal sins (or any kind of works that believers commit) are not forgiven (or rewarded) in this lifetime but on the next.

St. John, on the contrary, seems to proclaim that the post-baptismal sins of believers may be forgiven in this lifetime, but believers must first acknowledge and confess them before God (1John 1:9). In this line of thought, the process of justification with God seems to be heavily reliant on the nature of sins that believers commit. In 1John 5:16, for instance, St. John declares that there are two categories of sins – the mortal and non-mortal sins: “If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that”.



In this view, St. John argues that non-mortal sins may be forgiven: “If anyone... commit(s) a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life”. It appears to be mortal sins that the Apostle argues cannot be forgiven: “There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that” (1John 5:16). This gives the impression that believers are not supposed to pray for mortal sins – they are not forgiven. Having drawn this distinction between non-mortal and mortal sins, St. John however, does not take the time to state which sins falls under what category. He simply explains that there are “non-mortal sins”, which may be forgiven; and “mortal sins”, which may not be forgiven. And believers are discouraged to pray for mortal sins (1John 5:16).

These reviews therefore draw attention to the variations which arise out of the understanding of forgiveness post the baptism of believers by the Apostles. They appear to have held different notions regarding the forgiveness of post-baptismal sins. If the Apostles did not share the same view regarding the forgiveness of post-baptismal sins, therefore, how did the Christian Church approach this matter? What was the position of the church regarding the forgiveness of post-baptismal sins? Which interpretation(s) did they follow? And how did the church address the issue of believers who had fallen into sin after their baptism?

The conditional nature of forgiveness

In light of the scriptures, it is evident that God’s forgiveness is both ‘extensional’ and ‘conditional’. It is extensional in the sense that God unconditionally extends an invitation to forgive everyone who repents for the offer of salvation (Luke 1:69, 77; Romans 10:9-10; Ephesians 1:7; Titus 3:5-7). It is also conditional in the sense that God does not appear to forgive all kinds of sins. God does not seem to forgive the sins that are committed against the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:28-29; Matthew 12:31-32; Luke 12:10); He does not seem to forgive deliberate sins (Hebrews 10:26-27; Exodus 21:14; Numbers 15:30); and He does not seem to forgive the post-baptismal sin of falling away (Hebrew 6:4-6).

The conditional nature of forgiveness for sins therefore, appears to have greatly influenced the manner in which the Christian church approached this issue. Two basic strands, within Christendom, can be traced. The first is that of Protestantism and the second is that of Catholicism. These two strands differ considerably but are addressing the same subject – the justification of believers. Their views contradict significantly even though they are based upon the same biblical dogma of justification – they both acknowledge the biblical teaching of justification but significantly differ in its interpretation. This however, is not so strange because the early Christians also, were basically ambiguous on this matter.

They lacked a consistent understanding of the concept of forgiveness post the baptism of believers. Church Fathers like Tertullian, together with the Montanists, often followed the interpretation of St. Paul and believed that “there can be no remission of grave post-baptismal sins in this life but God might save the repentant Christian in the next life” (Brattston, 1991:333). Origen and other third century believers further interpreted St. Paul’s words, “the destruction of the flesh” in 1Corinthians 5:5, as signifying a stringent penance from which sinned believers may not be readmitted to the Eucharist and the Christian fellowship due to the magnitude of their sins (Brattston, 1991:333).

Yet again, following the interpretation of St. John, Tertullian, together with Novatian and other rigorist writers of the first three Christian centuries, held that the category of grievous sins such as apostasy, murder, and perhaps adultery can never be forgiven while less serious sins may be forgiven (Brattston, 1991:333). This implies that the understanding of forgiveness post the baptism of believers was often a complicated subject for early Christians. Some early Christians believed that the forgiveness of sins post the baptism of believers applied in this



lifetime, provided that the committed sins are non-mortal, while others held that all the post-baptismal sins of believers will be forgiven in the next life - in the day of the Lord.

Even though early Christians were confounded by this matter, the basis of their disagreement emanated from the biblical teaching of justification. This is because the Christian notion of forgiveness and the remission of sins is based on the doctrine of justification (Borris, 2003:6). Justification is considered to be the outcome of the acceptance of the Gospel by faith (Simuț, 2003:119; Carson, 1997:597). Reformers like Martin Luther believed that the doctrine of justification holds the other Christian doctrines together (Simuț, 2003:79). Preus (1984:1), citing Martin Luther, asserted that: "If this doctrine of justification is lost, the whole Christian doctrine is lost".

Thus, the Christian doctrine of Justification appears to be the anchor of all other Christian doctrines (Simuț, 2003:79; Preus, 1984:1). As the anchor of all other Christian doctrines, it seems necessary to examine how the Christian church interprets this doctrine. This is essential because the two primary strands in Christendom – Protestantism and Catholicism, appear to hold different views regarding this concept. Their variance begins with the understanding of the term "justification". In Protestantism, justification is understood to be by faith, and by faith alone (Johnson 2011:76). But in Catholicism, justification is understood to involve human cooperation and divine grace (Preus, 1981:163-184; Johnson, 2011:76). Drawing some distinctions between the two strands, Pink (2010:7) states that the term "justify" means "to formally pronounce just or legally declare righteous" within the Protestant interpretation; but it means "to make inherently righteous and holy" within the Roman Catholic view.

This is where variances seem to begin and looks to be sustained. Protestantism accentuates the role of faith, while Catholicism promotes human cooperation and grace. These variances in the interpretation of justification are further summed-up by Pink (2010:7) in the following manner:

Popery includes under justification the renovation of man's moral nature or deliverance from depravity, thereby confounding justification with regeneration and sanctification. On the other hand, all representative Protestants have shown that justification refers not to a change of moral character, but to a change of legal status; though allowing, yea, insisting, that a radical change of character invariably accompanies it. It is a legal change from a state of guilt and condemnation to a state of forgiveness and acceptance; and this change is owing solely to a gratuitous act of God, founded upon the righteousness of Christ (they having none of their own) being imputed to His people.

Thus, both Protestantism and Catholicism differ in the understanding of justification. While the Protestant view of justification denotes a "legal status," from which believers are "legally declared righteous" on the bases of Christ's righteousness; the Catholic view involves the renovation of human nature - "to make inherently righteous and holy", a process which requires the regeneration of the moral character through sanctification.

Protestantism and justification

The Protestant view of justification seems to suggest that forgiveness is 'once-and-for-all' (Johnson, 2011:768; Berkhof, 1939:513). This means that believers are 'once-and-for-all' forgiven their sins and are legally declared righteous on the bases of Christ's righteousness which is imputed on them during their conversion (Pink, 2010:20; Eveson, 1991:12). Because they are "legally declared righteous" at their conversion, they are thereafter no longer worthy of God's condemnation (Boettner, 1932.14.127). Their legal status changes from that of guilt and condemnation to a state of forgiveness and eternal acceptance (Snider, 2010:npn;



Berkhof, 1939:514). In such a state of “declared righteousness”, their salvation is understood to be eternally secured, and can never be lost (Boettner, 1932.14.127).

This is plainly communicated by the Westminster Confession in the following manner: “They whom God hath accepted in His Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved” (Westminster Confession, 1646. XVII.1). This seems to imply that believers may not “totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace” even if they sin post their baptism. In that sense, they are “legally declared righteous”, and their legal status is eternally secured. Thus, for these believers, no amount of sin and guilt may condemn them because they are unconditionally accepted – they remain unconditionally accepted by God, even when they continue to sin post their baptism.

In this narrative therefore, there appears to be no place for sanctification. Mostly because the process of sanctification rests upon the exercise of progressive righteousness, which finds no bearing in this view. In Protestantism, the process of sanctification appears to mainly apply during conversion, when the Spirit sanctifies believers (Boettner, 1932.14.127). Beyond that, it has no practical significance, as righteousness is understood to be based on faith and faith alone, and not on individual’s works. Johnson (2011:768) however, observes at least two problems with this Reformed understanding:

First, no NT author, including Paul, makes this particular distinction uniformly. Instead, secondly, the two relevant Greek cognate word-groups – *dikaioō* (*dikaïos*, *dikaïosunē*) and *hagiazō* (*hagiasmos*, *hagios*), which are translated by the English terms “justification”/“righteousness” and “sanctification”/“holiness” respectively – are both used in the NT to refer both to the absolute positive status of Christians with respect to God’s favor and to the gradual improving positive, ethico-spiritual quality of their lives.

Thus, according to Johnson (2011:768), the New Testament appears to employ both “justification or righteousness” and “sanctification or holiness” interchangeably. On the one hand, “justification” or “righteousness” implies that believers enjoy an absolute status, where they are legally declared righteous on the bases of Christ’s righteousness (Romans 1:17; 3:22-24; 4:3, 5-6; Galatians 2:16; 3:6; Ephesians 4:24; Philippians 3:9-10). On the other hand, “sanctification” or “holiness” implies that believers are gradually improving in their ethico-spiritual status and quality of life (2Corinthians 7:1; 1Thessalonians 3:13; 5:23; Hebrew 12:14). In this understanding therefore, justification and/or holiness, does not merely refer to a declared status, but to an ethico-spiritual quality of life as well.

In this sense, the Protestant view of justification appears to ignore the aspect of progressive righteousness, which aims at transforming the ethico-spiritual status and purity of believers. Underlining the need for progressive righteousness, St. Paul admonished believers not to take their gift of salvation for granted, but to work at it as if it is something they may lose if too complacent: “[...] continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Philippians 2:12-13). This passage seems to suggest that God still continues to construct the lives of believers – to will and to enable them to act according to His purpose. In such instances, one may naively assume that this refers to the practical part of progressive righteousness.

The Christian prerequisite for sanctification, which is necessitated by progressive righteousness, is idiosyncratically expressed by Johnson (2011:778) in this manner:

From God’s standpoint, He does not repeat himself; but from our standpoint, God is always present in our time and interacting with us. So, once we obtain forgiveness in Christ (Acts 10:43), we are still to confess our sins, in order to receive new forgiveness for new unrighteousness (1John 1:9), so our ongoing, existential faith participates in and yields eternal life throughout our lives (Col. 1:23).



This implies that believers continue to fall short of God's ethical standards, and commit sins, even after their baptism. This faintness necessitates the active involvement of the Spirit for sanctification, so that believers may receive new forgiveness for new unrighteousness (Johnson, 2011:778). In that regard, believers ought to repent from their post-baptismal sins and confess them so they may be restored (Draper, 2006:179-180). But the Protestant view of justification appears to overlook this component. It starts and concludes with the understanding of justification as a "legal" status, where believers are declared righteous on the bases of Christ's righteousness, which is imputed on them (Pauck, 1969:125; Maxcey, 1980:92-93; Reardon, 1981:124).

Catholicism and justification

The Catholic view of justification, on the contrary, seems to speak directly to the issue of progressive righteousness. It perceives justification as an ethico-spiritual exercise, from which believers are continually made righteous or holy through the process of regeneration and sanctification (Johnson, 2011:778). In this view, believers are not said to be "legally" declared righteous on the bases of Christ's righteousness, which is imputed on them; but are rather justified based on the righteousness that is inwardly produced by the Holy Spirit in their hearts (Linden, 2014:8). In Catholicism therefore, justification implies the moral transformation of sinners who accept the grace, which is brought by the sacraments, especially baptism, as an initial instrument of justification (Linden, 2014:8).

Thus, the Catholic view of justification concerns "the perlocutionary work of the Holy Spirit that actually brings about constructive change in the lives of believers through the meaning of the Son, the declarative Word of God" (Johnson, 2011:778). Baptism, in Catholicism, is looked upon as the initial instrument of justification, as the concept of justification is understood to be progressive – it continues to be an applicable process from which believers are put right with God, even after their baptism. After the baptism of believers, the Holy Spirit is said to "render the word effective by achieving its intended perlocutionary intension" (Vanhoozer, 2011:199).

In this sense, believers are required to mediate the work of the Spirit by faith. Johnson (2011:778), for instance, notes that justification in Catholicism comes through the mysterious co-agency of the Holy Spirit and the individual believer, and is mediated by the believers' faith. The difficulty however, with this interpretation, is that the notion of justification is mostly internalised, and dependent upon the condition of believers (Horton, 2007:216ff). Righteousness, in this view, is said to be "inborn" rather than imputed. Linden (2014:9) sums-up this idea in the following manner:

There is no imputation of an alien righteousness since righteousness is not credited from one person's account to another's. It is only "homegrown" and underway with God the gardener, but our hearts are the garden, weeds and all, where this partial righteousness is growing (Linden, 2014:9).

Within this perspective, justification parallels the allegory of a garden (the heart) with weeds, which grows partial righteousness since humanity is imperfect. In this garden, righteousness is said to be "home-grown" or inwardly developed, and begins to grow with the obedience of God as the gardener (Linden, 2014:9). Thus, the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit does not occur autonomously, it requires human effort, whereby believers mediate such work by faith. This implies that the notion of righteousness in Catholicism begins with the obedience to God and his word. Henceforth, believers get to inwardly grow their righteousness, which is partial as they are imperfect, through the aid of the Spirit.

In this view, both faith and works are necessary components for the process of regeneration and sanctification. Therefore, apart from the points that this perspective heavily relies on the aspect of internalised righteousness, which requires the believers' mediation by faith to be



facilitated by the Holy Spirit, and also ignores the legal declaration of believers as righteous, based on Christ's righteousness; it is much closer, in proximity, to the teachings of Jesus regarding the concept of justification. Jesus appears to have taught that righteousness is progressive. His instruction to a man who was with infirmity for thirty eight years was that he should "go and sin no more" (John 5:14). Jesus repeated this directive to a woman that was caught in adultery – "go and sin no more" (John 8:11).

Again, instructing his disciples, Jesus declared that except their righteousness exceeded that of the Scribes and Pharisees, they shall, in no case, enter into the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20). Jesus' understanding of righteousness, in these instances, appear to be progressive, and not merely "legally" declared. It required that those whose sins were forgiven must maintain some level of holiness, which surpassed that of the Scribes and Pharisees. That is probably why St. John insisted that every believer who hopes to see Christ must purify themselves, for Christ is pure (1John 3:3). St. Peter further reiterates this directive by instructing that believers must remain holy because God is holy (1Peter 1:15-16).

The Catholic perspective further looks upon the idea of justification as partial. It is partial because, even though justified by faith, believers still continue to fall into sin. They do not become immune to sin because they are saved, but are set free from the dominion of sin: "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin [...]. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:34, 36). After they have been freed from the power of sin, believers are admonished to shun away from sin (1Peter 1:13-17; Hebrew 12:1-2). But because their justification is partial, believers often fall short and happen to commit sins. In such cases, through their acknowledgement by heartfelt confessions, the Holy Spirit begins to regenerate and restore them to their former state of righteousness.

This seems to be aligned to the teaching of St. John (1:7). St. John was of the view that if believers sin, Christ will purify them from all unrighteousness: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify (or sanctify) us from all unrighteousness" (1John 1:7, 9). The Catholic view therefore, is closer to this ideal. It maintains that God does forgive sins, and purifies believers from all acts of unrighteousness post their baptism. This is done through the active service of the Holy Spirit and by the co-operation of the individual believer, which necessitates their mediation by faith.

Is there a vindication of post baptismal sins?

There seems to be a clear indication in scriptures that God's forgiveness comes first and without works (Hagner, 1993:152). The scriptures reveal God as the initiator of forgiveness, who freely forgives without requiring any human merit. Nonetheless, after conversion God seems to expect his children to maintain their lives by or exercise holiness. This however, is not a directive which secures the believers' gift of salvation because salvation comes through faith and by faith alone. Rather, it is a directive which outlines the ethico-spiritual application of salvation which is strictly reserved for the elect. Without the reformist exercise of holiness, so asserts the writer of Hebrews, no one shall see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14). But again, as to what one concludes in this matter, appears to be dependent on the lenses that one uses to interrogate this problem.

My view is that a reasonable solution has been offered by Martin Luther (1483-1546). Luther seems to have favoured both the Protestant and Catholic understandings of justification. For him, faith formed one of the links which connects the knowledge of forgiveness with the new life of righteousness (Bromiley, 1952:93). Martin Luther saw justification as both the "legal declaration of righteousness," and as "the process of regeneration" (Seeberg, 1977:114). He believed that "[t]he justified man is the man who by grace is accounted righteous. But the



justified man is also the man who by the same grace is regenerated and being made righteous” (Bromiley, 1952:93). These two perspectives did not appear to contradict each other to Luther.

He believed that “[r]ighteousness is imputed when the sinner believes. But also when the sinner believes the righteousness of Christ is inwardly received in regeneration, initiating and indeed involving the development of holiness which is the very essence of the Christian life” (Bromiley, 1952:93). This seems to suggest that Martin Luther first saw justification as a “reckoning or declaring righteous” (Bromiley, 1952:93), but also as a process of sanctification which includes the life of penitence upon which believers outwardly demonstrate the righteousness which the Holy Spirit has accomplished in them. In this sense, Martin Luther posited that being “legally declared righteous” is not enough, but that believers must demonstrate such a “legal” status of righteousness by obedience to God. Such obedience however, is not perfect. Therefore, where believers fall short of God’s standard of holiness, they must earnestly repent and rely upon the active service of the Holy Spirit to regenerate and sanctify them from all unrighteousness. Thus, Luther’s reasoning seems to give the impression that believers may be restored through justification post their baptismal sins. If that be the case, then the exercise of holiness is a serious directive for believers. For that reason, Boettner (1932.20.2) summed-up the importance of this directive in the following manner:

The Scriptures know of no perseverance which is not a perseverance in holiness, and they give no encouragement to any sense of security which is not connected with a present and ever increasing holiness. Virtue and piety, therefore, are the effect and not the cause of election, for which no cause is to be assigned except God's sovereign good pleasure. It is true that some become much more advanced in holiness here and continue in that state over a much longer period of time than do others; yet it is vain for any who do not partake in some degree of holiness in this world to hope to enjoy happiness in the next. All those whom God has designed to render perfectly happy in eternity, He has designed to make in part happy in this world; and as holiness is essential to the happiness of an intelligent creature, so there is begun in them in this world that holiness without which no one shall see the Lord.

Therefore, there appears to be no excuse for believers to neglect the exercise of holiness, it is an ethico-spiritual directive which is binding. In this manner, virtue and piety, are the effectual outcomes and not the cause of election, from which “no cause is to be assigned except God's sovereign good pleasure” (Boettner, 1932.20.2).

Conclusion

The Christian call to holiness does not seem to adequately address the problem of sin. Believers often dismay when they have fallen short of God standards, or have committed sins. In such instances, believers struggle to reconcile the message of hope against that of condemnation, as illustrated by Robert Murray McCheyene. Unfortunately, the Apostles did not seem to offer a consistent interpretation regarding the forgiveness of post baptismal sins; and the Christian church is divided in the conceptualisation of the doctrine of justification.

What are believers to do when overwhelmed by guilt of sin post their baptism, and how are they to address this issue? Martin Luther appears to offer a reasonable solution to this dilemma, by maintaining that believers may be forgiven and restored post their baptism, when they earnestly confess and repent from them.

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