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Hope-Filled Sanctification: A Reformed Appropriation of the Theological Virtue of Hope

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Abstract

Roman Catholic scholar Josef Pieper has suggested that the Protestant teaching of salvation by grace alone promotes a type of false assurance that undermines the necessity of striving for Christlikeness in the lives of Christians. Protestants do sometimes sound as if justification and sanctification are identical therefore downplaying the importance of good works and the pilgrim character of the Christian life. Nonetheless, a proper understanding of the distinction between justification and sanctification maintains both the Reformation emphasis on grace and a robust place for human striving toward sanctification in cooperation with the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the Thomist tradition's understanding of the theological virtues, as interpreted by Pieper, has the potential to offer a category for understanding the striving of sanctification as the fitting action of one with the disposition of hope.

Keywords

hope, sanctification, Reformed, Aquinas, ethics

Introduction

The Thomist tradition understands hope as a theological virtue. Thomas Aquinas describes virtue as that “which makes its subject good, and its work good likewise.”¹ Thus, any time we see a human action which fits these two criteria, according to Aquinas, we see a virtue. Josef Pieper fleshes this out a bit. He says, “Virtue means the steadfastness of man’s orientation toward the realization of his nature, that is, toward good.”² The “good,” in the case of the theological virtues, is happiness or blessedness in God himself. Terence Penelhum writes,

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (*S.T.* in future citations), II-II, 17, 1.

² Josef Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 99.

“It is he [God] in whom we believe in in [*sic*] faith, have confidence in in hope, and love in charity.”³

Pieper discusses the importance of virtue for the Christian life in his book, *Faith, Hope, Love*. In his treatment of the virtue of hope, he identifies the two ways in which hope can falter: despair and presumption. He further identifies two distinct forms of presumption. According to Pieper, the first sort of presumption “is characterized by the more or less explicit thesis that man is able by his own human nature to win eternal life and the forgiveness of sins.”⁴ In short, Pieper describes what some might explain as salvation by works. If one is a pretty good person and lives a morally upright life by human standards but apart from reliance on God and God’s grace, that person can expect to enjoy life in the presence of God. Pieper associates this with Pelagius.⁵

The second form of presumption that Pieper identifies has to do with what he calls “premature certainty” regarding salvation.⁶ He associates this sort of presumption with the “heresy propagated by the Reformation,” that is, “the sole efficacy of God’s redemptive and engracing action.”⁷ He writes:

By teaching the absolute certainty of salvation solely by virtue of the merits of Christ, this heresy destroys the true pilgrim character of Christian existence by making as certain for the individual Christian as the revealed fact of redemption the belief that he had already “actually” achieved the goal of salvation.⁸

Pieper suggests that the Protestant notion of salvation by grace promotes a type of false assurance that one has achieved the goal that is in reality a promised future good. The danger is that if one thinks she has this future good in hand, what need is there to strive toward it? To put it differently, what is the point of striving to be like Christ if the goal of salvation has already been attained?

³ Terence Penelhum, “The Analysis of Faith in St. Thomas Aquinas,” *Religious Studies* 13 (June 1977): 134.

⁴ Pieper, 126.

⁵ Pieper, *Faith*, 126.

⁶ Pieper, *Faith*, 126.

⁷ Pieper, *Faith*, 126.

⁸ Pieper, *Faith*, 126-7. Pieper really has two concerns here. First, he is concerned that an overemphasis on grace based on the merits of Christ will lead to lack of striving in sanctification. Second, he is concerned with what in Reformed circles would be understood as the assurance of salvation sometimes formulated as the perseverance of the saints. (Canons of Dort, fifth head of doctrine) This essay is will address only the first concern.

Pieper's concern is well worth considering. Protestants at times do sound as if salvation and justification are identical and, as a result, downplay the necessity of the work of sanctification in the life of a Christian.⁹ Nonetheless, a proper understanding of the Reformed theological distinction between justification and sanctification within the broader category of salvation by grace does not undermine the pilgrim character of the Christian life. This essay will demonstrate that such an understanding maintains both the Reformation emphasis on grace alone as well as a robust place for human striving toward sanctification in cooperation with the Holy Spirit. With a clear understanding of the relationship between justification and sanctification in hand, this essay will further demonstrate how the theological virtue of hope as understood in the Thomist tradition has the potential to offer a category for understanding the striving of sanctification not as a regression toward Pelagianism as some Protestants might fear, but as the fitting action of one with the disposition of hope.

Salvation by Grace

It is not particularly difficult to understand why Pieper identifies certain Protestant notions of salvation by grace with the danger of presumption and the corresponding lack of striving that accompanies that disposition. In part, Pieper is simply reflecting a historic Roman Catholic understanding of the teaching of the Reformers. The Council of Trent makes clear that "vain and ungodly confidence" in the forgiveness of sins opposes the true teaching of the church.¹⁰ It furthermore states that "no one ought to flatter himself with faith alone, thinking that by faith alone he is made an heir and will obtain the inheritance."¹¹ The Roman Catholic church was concerned that the Reformer's teaching of *sola fides* would undermine the necessity for right living, for good works. In fact, to teach the assurance of one's justification apart from works is anathema. Canon 9 asserts, "If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone, meaning that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification, and that it is not in any way necessary that he be prepared and disposed

⁹ This seems to be true at the practical, lay level if not specifically taught in the theologies of various Protestant denominations. See for example N.T. Wright, *Justification* (Downer's Grove: IVP, 2009), 11; John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downer's Grove: IVP, 1986), 188.

¹⁰ Council of Trent, Ch. IX, <http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/trento6.htm>, accessed 5-8-12.

¹¹ Council of Trent, Ch. XI, <http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/trento6.htm>, accessed 5-8-12.

by the action of his own will, let him be anathema.”¹² From the Roman Catholic point of view, the Reformers consider works of the law as optional with respect to one’s salvation. In addition, some of the reformer’s literature from the Reformation era and beyond is inconsistent in the use of terminology associated with salvation and could therefore be misleading.¹³ Clarifying the historical Reformed distinction between justification and sanctification will help alleviate this misunderstanding.

While Reformed thought does distinguish between justification and sanctification in a way that is different from Roman Catholic teaching, both doctrines are considered necessary aspects of salvation, the overarching category. In other words, one cannot separate justification from sanctification or suggest that a person might be justified and not sanctified. John Stott notes that some of the ambiguity with regard to exactly where to divide justification and sanctification is not even clear in the biblical text.¹⁴ Nonetheless, Stott, in accordance with the Protestant tradition overall, affirms the importance of keeping the distinction in tact.¹⁵

In Protestant understanding, justification is God’s declaration that sinful human persons are righteous by virtue of faith in Christ’s work on their behalf.

¹² Council of Trent, Canon 9, <http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/trento6.htm>, accessed 5-8-12. See also Canon 11, 14, 16, 19, 20, and 24.

¹³ See for example the Belgic Confession article 22, one of the confessional standards used by many Reformed churches, where “salvation” and “justification” seem to be used synonymously. While this is clarified in the succeeding articles, 23 and 24, if all one did was read article 22, it is fairly easy to see how the confusion could arise. Of course, a hesitance on the part of the Reformers to speak about striving, even with sanctification, is understandable given the insecurity fostered by late medieval Roman Catholic piety which overemphasized striving and underemphasized assurance of salvation, a piety against which the Reformers were reacting. See for example, Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformation*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 58-70. The tradition of speaking about an “order of salvation” may also have contributed to the confusion. While the order was understood as a logical order, it is sometimes misunderstood by clergy and lay people to be a temporal order. Thus, one could conceive of justification without sanctification. In addition, a number of antinomian movements did arise in the wake of the Reformation. While these tended to be fringe movements and not part of mainstream thought at the time, the fact that some took the Reformation teaching of justification by faith to negate the necessity of good works in the life of a Christian likely fueled Roman Catholic sentiments regarding the danger of this teaching. There is also confusion in some contemporary literature about the meaning of “imputation” with respect to the righteousness of Christ. The way some authors frame this doctrine, it is not difficult to come away with the notion that one has arrived, morally, and therefore any striving is optional. See for example, John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 171.

¹⁴ Stott, *Cross*, 186.

¹⁵ Stott, *Cross*, 186.

Stott writes, "When God justifies sinners, he is not declaring bad people to be good, or saying that they are not sinners after all; he is pronouncing them legally righteous, free from any liability to the broken law, because he himself in his Son has borne the penalty of their law-breaking."¹⁶ Justification is understood by Protestants to be a completely gracious gift of God. Plantinga, Thompson, and Lundberg explain, "Justification therefore is entirely the act of God, who forgives the believer's sin on the basis of Christ's substitutionary death and views the believer as if she possesses the righteousness of Christ."¹⁷ In other words, human works have no place in the doctrine of justification. Reliance on works will lead only to condemnation.¹⁸

This understanding of justification by God's grace alone, however, does not mean that good works should not be part of the salvation of the Christian. As Plantinga, et al. point out, "traditional Protestant theology . . . has simply considered works to belong to a different category, that of *sanctification*, which nonetheless is an inseparable and indispensable moment of salvation."¹⁹ Sanctification is "the process in the Christian life of becoming holy; the gradual and life-long progression of being conformed in disposition and behavior to the image of Christ through God's grace."²⁰ The ultimate goal of this progression, and therefore of humans, is union with God, or to put it in more biblical terms, life in the presence of God. Like Plantinga, et al., Stott also makes clear the indissoluble connection between justification and sanctification, while affirming that works belong in the category of sanctification.²¹ Contra The Council of Trent, reflected in Pieper's comments, Protestants do have a place within salvation for good works. Unfortunately, it is not always clear exactly how the works of sanctification fit the larger picture of salvation, or for some authors, whether effort on our part is even required for sanctification. While Reformed theology is by no means monolithic on this subject, there is broad support for the thought that sanctification is a process in which humans cooperate with the grace of God.

¹⁶ Stott, *Cross*, 190.

¹⁷ Richard Plantinga, Thomas R. Thompson, and Matthew D. Lundberg, *An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 327.

¹⁸ Plantinga, et al., *Introduction*, 327.

¹⁹ Plantinga, et al., *Introduction*, 329.

²⁰ Plantinga, et al., *Introduction*, 598.

²¹ Stott, *Cross*, 186.

Cooperative Grace in Reformed Thought

From a Reformed perspective, perhaps no one is more eloquent in outlining the contours of salvation than John Calvin. Given his status in Reformed thinking, he also provides a good starting point for examining the place of human works in salvation. Calvin gives a helpful picture of the intimate relationship between justification and sanctification, as well as outlining what the believer's role in sanctification is. Calvin speaks of salvation in terms of a "double grace."²²

He describes one part of the double grace as "that being reconciled to God through Christ's blamelessness, we may have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father."²³ This grace is that of justification. Justification is "the main hinge on which religion turns," according to Calvin.²⁴ He understands justification as a judicial declaration by God which forms the basis of one's acceptance. God has, because of Christ's sacrifice on their behalf, pronounced guilty sinners 'not guilty,' and counts those who are in Christ not as enemies of his kingdom, but at peace with God, counted as God's children.²⁵ Justification is God's declaration of one's righteous status or innocence before God, and the forgiveness of sins.²⁶ Justification happens completely apart from human works.²⁷ Humans are declared righteous because of Christ's work on their behalf. But Calvin also makes clear that this declared righteousness of believers is not identical with moral perfection.²⁸ Becoming a new creature is a process associated with sanctification.²⁹

Sanctification or repentance is the second type of grace.³⁰ Calvin writes that Christians are "sanctified by Christ's spirit" and so "aspire to integrity and purity of life."³¹ Calvin makes clear that although justification and sanctification are

²² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III.11.1, ed. John T. McNeill, trans., Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960). Unless otherwise indicated I will use the Battles translation of the 1559 *Institutes*.

²³ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.11.1.

²⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.11.1.

²⁵ Romans 5:1; Rom. 8:16.

²⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.11.2-3.

²⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.11.6.

²⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, III. 11.3-4. See also Randall C. Gleason, *John Calvin and John Owen on Mortification: A Comparative Study in Reformed Spirituality* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 56.

²⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.11.6.

³⁰ I will generally use the term "sanctification" to refer to this other grace. Calvin, however, seems to use regeneration, repentance, and sanctification almost synonymously.

³¹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III.11.1. trans. Henry Beveridge, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1863); Ioannis Calvini, *Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, ed. Guilielmus Baum, Eduardus

distinct in how they operate, they cannot be separated from one another. "The grace of justification," writes Calvin, "is not separated from regeneration, although they are things distinct."³² What is not as clear in Calvin regarding this distinction between justification and sanctification is the necessity for human striving or cooperation in the grace of sanctification. Sometimes Calvin writes as if sanctification is something conferred on believers by God, with no action on their part. For example, he explains "that repentance is a singular gift of God I believe to be so clear from the above teaching that there is no need of a long discourse to explain it."³³ Just a few paragraphs earlier, however, Calvin writes about the need to strive throughout life toward repentance. "We must strive toward repentance itself, devote ourselves to it throughout life, and pursue it to the very end if we would abide in Christ."³⁴ So does Calvin see the believer as a passive recipient of sanctifying grace or as one who cooperates with that grace?

It seems that Calvin wants to hold God's grace and human action in sanctification in some tension. Randall Gleason points out that some of Calvin's language "stresses the passive role the believer plays in being conformed to Christ."³⁵ This emphasis on God's initiative could be misleading and is, perhaps, where Pieper's misunderstanding originates. It could be understood from Calvin that God sanctifies and the believer simply waits around with the expectation of becoming more Christ-like. Or perhaps Christlikeness is simply infused into the believer with no effort whatsoever needed on her part.

Despite Calvin's affirmation of the initiating role of God's grace in sanctification, however, Calvin's discourse on the Christian life should put to rest any notion that the Christian's role is one of passivity.³⁶ He writes at one point, for example, "Only let us look toward our mark with sincere simplicity and aspire to our goal; not fondly flattering ourselves, nor excusing our own evil deeds, but with continuous effort striving toward this end: that we may surpass ourselves in goodness until we attain to goodness itself."³⁷ Calvin is clear that we are not alone in this effort, but work in reliance on the Holy Spirit. Nonetheless he is equally clear that we must work.

Cunitz, Eduardus Reuss, volume II (Brunsvigae: Apud C. A. Schwetschke et Filium, 1864), column 533, "deinde ut eius spiritu sanctificati innocentiam puritatemque vitae meditemur."

³² Calvin, *Institutes*, III.11.11.

³³ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.3.21.

³⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.20.

³⁵ Gleason, *Calvin*, 57.

³⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.6-9.

³⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.7.5.

But even before the section on the Christian life Calvin writes that the very thought of standing before the judgment seat of God, where every word and deed will be accounted for, “will not permit the miserable man to rest nor to breathe freely even for a moment without stirring him continually to reflect upon another mode of life whereby he may be able to stand firm in that judgment.”³⁸ Just a few paragraphs later he writes about the difficulty of putting the old self to death and recognizes this as a continual process.³⁹

Gleason writes about Calvin’s doctrine of mortification, “God’s grace does not prevent the believer’s involvement in sanctification, but in fact makes his participation possible by enabling him to struggle effectually against sin and progress successfully towards conformity to Christ.”⁴⁰ Thus, although Calvin may at times be ambiguous, his overall teaching affirms the necessity of human striving in sanctification. Indeed, Calvin writes that he chose to describe sanctification before justification because “it seemed of more consequence first to explain that the faith by which alone, through the mercy of God, we obtain free justification, is not destitute of good works.”⁴¹

Though Calvin may at times be unclear, later Reformed theology took pains to clarify. Justification and sanctification continue to be understood as inseparable yet distinct. But sanctification, unlike justification, is clearly understood as that part of salvation in which humans cooperate with God. Francis Turretin in his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* makes a distinction between the first moment of conversion and the ongoing work of conversion that conforms one to the image of God. While Turretin affirms that humans are passive in the first moment or stage of conversion, this is not true of what he calls the second stage of becoming more Christ-like. In this second stage Turretin writes that the Christian “is not merely passive, but cooperates with God (or rather operates under him). Indeed he actually believes and converts himself to God; while being acted upon, he acts; and being regenerated and moved by God, he moves himself to the exercise of the new life.”⁴² Turretin recognizes a form of cooperative grace in the work of sanctification.

Several other examples should suffice to demonstrate that the notion of sanctification as a grace with which Christians cooperate is not unknown in Reformed theology. In distinguishing between justification and sanctification

³⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.7.

³⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.8-9.

⁴⁰ Gleason, *Calvin*, 58.

⁴¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.1. trans. Beveridge.

⁴² Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Vol. 2, 15.5.2.

Heinrich Heppe, a 19th century Reformed theologian, notes that sanctification has its root in justification.⁴³ However, whereas justification is purely God's activity in humans, sanctification requires cooperation. He writes, "The former [justification] is a once-for-all act of God imparted in the same way; the latter [sanctification] is a gradual process variously completed according to the varying measure of the Spirit which the individual receives. In the former man's relation to the grace that sanctifies him is purely passive; in the latter he cooperates with it."⁴⁴

Herman Bavinck also affirms the inseparability yet distinction between justification and sanctification. Although, like Calvin, Bavinck at times sounds as though sanctification is something God does apart from us, in his discussion of what he calls "passive" and "active" sanctification he makes clear that Christians cooperate with God in sanctification. After affirming that sanctification is a gift of God and therefore in some way passive, Bavinck goes on to explain that it is "not exhausted by what is done for and in believers."⁴⁵ Unlike Heppe, he does not speak specifically of cooperation. Nonetheless, Bavinck insists that "people themselves are called and equipped to sanctify themselves and devote their whole life to God."⁴⁶ In that he links this tightly to God's work within the believer, cooperation with the Spirit in sanctification would not be a misinterpretation of how Bavinck understands what he calls earlier an "obligation" of Christians.⁴⁷ Sanctification is, according to Bavinck, both "God's all-encompassing activity and our responsibility."⁴⁸

Louis Berkhof also writes of both the distinction between justification and sanctification and the necessary link between them. With regard to sanctification Berkhof affirms the necessity of God's initiating action in Christians for sanctification. "God only," he writes, "can be called the author of conversion."⁴⁹ But he goes on to stress that humans are not passive in the work

⁴³ Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources* (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1950), 565.

⁴⁴ Heinrich Heppe, *Dogmatics*, 565-6.

⁴⁵ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 4, *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 253.

⁴⁶ Bavinck, *Dogmatics*, Vol. 4, 253.

⁴⁷ Bavinck, *Dogmatics*, Vol. 4, 236. Bavinck is speaking here of what he calls the "holy life." He asserts that Christians are both "obligated" to live a holy life and that they "owe it to God." One could hardly argue that Bavinck has a passive sense of how sanctification works based on statements such as these.

⁴⁸ Bavinck, *Dogmatics*, Vol. 4, 253.

⁴⁹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology: New Combined Edition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 490.

of sanctification. With reference to the Biblical use of the Hebrew word for turning or conversion, he affirms the importance of human cooperation with God in conversion. He writes, "But though God is the author of conversion, it is of great importance to stress the fact, over against a false passivity, that there is also a certain co-operation of man in conversion."⁵⁰ Like Hepppe, Berkhof is not shy of actually identifying sanctification as something in which humans cooperate with God's grace.

From an early reformer to later theologians, these examples demonstrate that at least in Reformed theology, passivity with regard to sanctification is not commended. Contra Pieper's understanding of Protestant theology, striving in cooperation with the Holy Spirit in sanctification is part of the overall package of salvation by grace alone. But what about the practical problem that Pieper rightly points out? How can theology help people understand that striving toward Christlikeness is not works-righteousness but rather a necessary part of salvation? Understanding the theological virtue of hope as the proper disposition for sanctification may offer a valuable means toward this end.

The Virtue of Hope

As mentioned in the introduction, hope is one of the virtues Thomas Aquinas identifies as a theological virtue. Virtues are not, as modern culture would suggest, mere respectability. Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, Colleen McClusky, and Christina Van Dyke, in their work on Aquinas's ethics, help elucidate virtue as understood in the Thomist tradition. "Virtues," they write, "are the sorts of habits that both perfect human nature and in so doing also properly order their actions to their ultimate end."⁵¹ Virtues are habits or dispositions that have taken root in a person. As DeYoung explains, "Virtues are 'excellences' of character, habits or dispositions of character that help us live well as human beings."⁵² As such, they should be understood as the ground from which behaviors sprout rather than particular behaviors themselves, and they offer a framework for recognizing what underlies certain behaviors.⁵³ Virtues are generally

⁵⁰ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 490.

⁵¹ Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, Colleen McCluskey, and Christina Van Dyke, *Aquinas's Ethics: Metaphysical Foundations, Moral Theory, and Theological Context*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 132.

⁵² Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Rewards*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), 14.

⁵³ DeYoung, *Vices*, 16-19.

acquired or strengthened by practice until the disposition becomes second nature to us.⁵⁴ DeYoung et al. go on to distinguish between four kinds of virtues as identified by Aquinas: intellectual virtues, moral virtues, four cardinal virtues, and the three theological virtues: Faith, hope and love. Each type is related to the capacity it is intended to perfect.⁵⁵

Although the natural virtues can be acquired by practice, the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and love are only available as gracious gifts infused in the regenerate by the operation of the Holy Spirit.⁵⁶ "Infused virtues," writes DeYoung in reference to the theological virtues, "are created in the soul by the direct action of God."⁵⁷ They are not acquired by practicing their characteristic traits.⁵⁸ Terence Penelhum writes that the theological virtues "are due to a special infusion of grace, and do not derive from any natural aptitude in us in the way that the natural virtues do."⁵⁹

This idea that faith, hope and love are given to humans by God actually arises from Scripture. Aquinas cites 1 Corinthians 13 as the Biblical authority for identifying hope as a theological virtue.⁶⁰ He argues that the habit of hope flows from grace alone.⁶¹ Aquinas seems to simply be recognizing that faith, hope, and love are identified by Paul as spiritual gifts, that is, gifts that come to the believer from God. Although there is a tendency not to think of them in these terms, Paul treats faith, hope, and love as gifts in the same sense that speaking in tongues and prophecy are gifts. In fact, he closes out his discussion of the spiritual gifts by noting that faith, hope, and love are the greatest, and most enduring spiritual gifts without which the other gifts are rendered nearly useless.⁶²

⁵⁴ DeYoung et al., *Ethics*, 147.

⁵⁵ DeYoung, et al., *Ethics*, 137.

⁵⁶ DeYoung, et al., *Ethics*, 145. For a more complete treatment of the differences between the types of virtues and the role of the Holy Spirit in infusing the virtues please see DeYoung's explanation, pp. 147-47. Grace, as she points out, is not attached only to the theological virtues, but is operative in the other virtues as well. This notion of faith, hope, and love as gifts of the Spirit arises directly from Scripture. Paul closes out his discussion of spiritual gifts in 1 Cor. 12 and 13 by stating that the greatest gifts of all are faith, hope, and love (1 Cor. 13:13).

⁵⁷ DeYoung, et al., *Ethics*, 143.

⁵⁸ DeYoung, et al., *Ethics*, 143.

⁵⁹ Penelhum, "Analysis," 135.

⁶⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (S.T. in future citations), II-II, 17, 5.

⁶¹ Aquinas, S.T., II-II, 17, 1.

⁶² This seems obvious not only from Paul's statements about the uselessness of the gifts apart from love earlier in the chapter, but also from the final verse (v. 13) where Paul identifies this triad of gifts as "remaining" while the other spiritual gifts will not (v. 8-10). Additionally, although this text is the one Aquinas cites in his discussion of the virtues, it should be noted that these three

Like all the theological virtues, hope strives not toward the end of natural happiness, but toward supernatural happiness.⁶³ This end is what distinguishes hope as a theological virtue from certain secular notions of hope.⁶⁴ The specific good to which hope orders human living is, according to Aquinas, “eternal life, which consists in the enjoyment of God himself.”⁶⁵ The aim of hope, in other words, is happiness or blessedness in God. Because this ultimate good will not be fully realized in this life the human condition must be understood, according to Pieper, as ‘being on the way.’⁶⁶ In other words, humans have not and will not fully experience enjoyment of God or perfect beatitude in this life but recognize themselves as pilgrims trusting God for assistance in reaching that end. Thus, Aquinas emphasizes that hope entails both the ultimate end of eternal happiness (enjoyment of God), and trust in God’s assistance for obtaining that end.⁶⁷

Although hope as a theological virtue is understood as a gift of grace, this does not mean that it cannot be developed. On the contrary, we are expected to develop this virtue. “Once God gives us a virtue,” writes DeYoung, “it is up to us to act on it.”⁶⁸ The point of understanding hope as a gift of grace is that hope, like faith and love, is not something one can call up and develop apart from God. For example, one cannot just wake up one day and decide to work on being more hopeful. Both the initiative and development of the virtue hope come from God. Furthermore, as Pieper points out, humans will not even recognize hope as a virtue apart from God’s revealing grace.⁶⁹

Even though hope is infused by God, it can nonetheless be derailed in two distinct ways. First, despair can squelch hope. Aquinas actually identifies despair as a movement away from God and therefore, a sin.⁷⁰ Pieper elucidates Aquinas’ description, calling despair “a perverse anticipation of the

gifts are frequently listed by Paul, both together and separately, as characterizing the life of the believer. See, for example, Romans 5:1-5; 1 Thess. 1:3; 1 Thess. 3:6; 1 Thess. 5:8; Eph. 5:5-6.

⁶³ Aquinas, *S.T.*, I-II, 62.1.

⁶⁴ There is debate about how secular and theological hope relate to one another particularly with regard to the end to which they order human actions. Specifically, Dominic Doyle has suggested that despite the distinction between secular and eschatological hopes, there is a connection between them. See Dominic Doyle, “*Spe Salvi* on Eschatological and Secular Hope: A Thomistic Critique of An Augustinian Encyclical,” *Theological Studies* 71 (2010): 350-379.

⁶⁵ Aquinas, *S.T.*, II-II, 17.2.

⁶⁶ Pieper, *Faith*, 100.

⁶⁷ Aquinas, *S.T.*, II-II, 17, 2 and 7.

⁶⁸ DeYoung, et al., *Ethics*, 144.

⁶⁹ Pieper, *Faith*, 100.

⁷⁰ Aquinas, *S.T.*, II-II, 20, 1.

nonfulfillment of hope.”⁷¹ The despairing person loses sight of the end in one way or another and gives up on striving. William Mann writes, “despair is the abandonment of hope, a kind of turning away from God that results when salvation is deemed to be beyond the reach of the sinful creature.”⁷² “Despair,” writes Nicholas Lash, “stays paralyzed, deadened by impotence and guilt.”⁷³ At its core, despair doubts that God can or will carry through on his promises.

The other way that hope can be sent off the tracks, the aggressive form of the sin, is presumption. Like despair, Aquinas identifies presumption as a sin.⁷⁴ Pieper writes that presumption, like despair, is a perverse anticipation—“a perverse anticipation of the fulfillment of hope.”⁷⁵ Presumption is not a condition of having too much hope. Rather, presumption, like despair, is a lack of hope. In the case of presumption however, the lack of hope stems from the belief that one has already arrived at the goal in some way or is fully capable of achieving the goal by one’s own efforts. Thus, according to Mann, “presumption is a rejection of hope as unnecessary, either because one presumes that salvation is within one’s own power or because one presumes that God’s mercy will save even those who are unrepentant.”⁷⁶ Presumption takes the ‘not yet’ out of hope. It thinks it has already attained the future good. Presumption fails to regard earthly existence as a condition of ‘being on the way.’⁷⁷ In fact, both presumption and despair deny the pilgrim character of the Christian life either by thinking one cannot arrive at the promised goal, or that one has already arrived.

In summary, the virtue of hope is understood to be a gift that is infused in the Christian by grace. The hopeful person recognizes herself as being on the way toward blessedness and enjoyment of God, but not yet having arrived at that goal. As with any virtue, hope must be practiced to be strengthened and developed. Thus, hope is characterized by striving in keeping with the recognition that one is ‘on the way.’ But this is not striving done in isolation or in fear. Even as hope is initiated by the grace of God, so it must be developed in cooperation with God’s grace. Thus, the Christian cooperates with God’s grace to

⁷¹ Pieper, *Faith*, 113.

⁷² William E. Mann, “Hope,” in *Reasoned Faith: Essays in Philosophical Theology in Honor of Norman Kretzmann*, ed. Eleonore Stump (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 276.

⁷³ Nicholas Lash, “Hoping Against Hope or Abraham’s Dilemma,” *Modern Theology* 10 (July 1994): 244.

⁷⁴ Aquinas, *S.T.*, II-II, 21, 1.

⁷⁵ Pieper, *Faith*, 113.

⁷⁶ Mann, “Hope,” 276.

⁷⁷ Pieper, *Faith*, 125.

develop the virtue of hope. With this description in mind, I will show how hope is the proper virtue or disposition for sanctification and that works of sanctification actually develop hope.

A Proposed Synthesis between Sanctification and Hope

From a Reformed perspective, sanctification is a work in which humans cooperate with the work of the Holy Spirit. We strive in cooperation with the Holy Spirit toward the goal holiness. But perfect sanctification is not achieved within this lifetime. The Heidelberg Catechism, a confession affirmed by many in the Reformed faith, makes this clear. For example, the answers to questions 56 and 115 both indicate that striving and struggle toward Christlikeness characterizes the Christian life, a struggle that question 115 states will not be over until “after this life.”⁷⁸ In addition, question and answer 42 indicate that one of the blessings of death is that it “puts an end to our sinning.”⁷⁹ Thus, the Heidelberg authors make clear that complete sanctification is not a possibility for this life in Reformed thinking. Sanctification is something we already enjoy, but which we also await. Christians are given the gift of sanctification, but have not and will not arrive at complete sanctification, perfect holiness, within this lifetime according to Reformed theology. In other words, the very nature of sanctification is “already-but-not-yet.”

Like sanctification, the virtue of hope is characterized by its “not-yet” nature. Pieper writes, “Hope is one of the very simple primordial dispositions of the living person. In hope, humans reach “with restless heart”, with confidence and patient expectation . . . toward the arduous “not yet” of fulfillment, whether natural or supernatural.”⁸⁰ Ultimate fulfillment of hope rests in God alone, something that can be experienced only partially in this life. Hope is characterized by the status of being ‘on the way.’ Pieper writes that “man finds himself, even until the moment of his death, in the *status viatoris*, in the state of being

⁷⁸ *The Heidelberg Catechism*, (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1988). Question 56 asks, “What do you believe concerning “the forgiveness of sins”? It answers, “I believe that God, because of Christ’s atonement, will never hold against me any of my sins nor my sinful nature *which I need to struggle against all my life*.” (emphasis mine). Question 115 asks, “No one in this life can obey the Ten Commandments perfectly: why then does God want them preached so pointedly?” The second part of the answer is, “so that while praying to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, we may never stop striving to be renewed more and more after God’s image, until after this life we reach our goal: perfection.”

⁷⁹ *The Heidelberg Catechism*, (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1988).

⁸⁰ Pieper, Faith, 100.

on the way.”⁸¹ Like sanctification, complete fulfillment of hope awaits the life to come. This future orientation of hope gives it an eschatological, already-but-not-yet character similar to sanctification.

In addition to the eschatological character of both sanctification and hope, both are also gifts of grace. As a theological virtue, hope is, in Thomist thinking, an infused gift, not something available apart from the gracious initiative of God. In Reformed thinking, sanctification is also a gift of grace, a gift primarily associated with the work of the Holy Spirit. Both gifts are understood as forms of the sort of grace with which we cooperate. So what is the relationship between these two concepts?

One way to picture sanctification is through the image of dying and rising with Christ, an image Paul uses in connection with baptism (Rom. 6:4). Calvin, in his commentary on Romans, speaks of this dying and rising as a benefit of union with Christ.⁸² This is not a one-time benefit, however. Dying and rising is an ongoing process. Christians must strive to daily put off the old sinful self. Calvin writes, “It is indeed well with us if our flesh is continually mortified.”⁸³ Likewise, we must strive to rise daily to our new life in Christ. So just a few lines later Calvin adds that “newness of life is to be pursued by Christians as long as they live.”⁸⁴ Furthermore, this ongoing process is both intentional and hard. Calvin warns that this is warfare of sorts, and it takes our whole lives.⁸⁵ It is precisely this ongoing, intentional dying and rising that hope addresses.

If dying and rising is the basic rhythm of sanctification, hope is the virtue or character trait that keeps that rhythm in tempo. The Christian life is a journey. Christians are a pilgrim people, a wilderness people working toward perfect holiness and enjoyment of God, but delayed in fully achieving that goal. The temptations of the journey are numerous. The road of sanctification is difficult and potentially painful. Like Israel in the wilderness, sometimes life in Egypt looks much better than the hope of promised future blessedness.⁸⁶ The disposition of hope sets the pace for the journey toward the goal of holiness; it attacks the temptation to turn back to our former way of life in despair of ever reaching the goal, of ever being good enough. But hope also keeps us from presumptively thinking that we are already good enough, or that this striving is

⁸¹ Pieper, 92.

⁸² John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. and ed. Rev. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 222-23.

⁸³ Calvin, *Romans*, 226.

⁸⁴ Calvin, *Romans*, 227.

⁸⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.9.

⁸⁶ Numbers 14:1-4.

something we must do on our own—that justification is by grace alone and sanctification is by us alone.

One who cultivates the virtue of hope will be reminded that progress in sanctification is not optional. The twin dangers of presumption and despair threaten to derail this progress. As Pieper writes, “One who looks only at the justice of God is as little able to hope as one who looks only at the mercy of God.”⁸⁷ The virtue of hope, with its affirmation that Christians are people who are “on the way,” keeps sanctification moving forward toward the goal of holiness and enjoyment of God. People of hope are those who recognize that they are saved by grace. They are justified by grace alone once and for all. They are already sanctified and yet continue to be sanctified by grace that cooperates with human striving. As one of my colleagues has described it, the Christian in this life has been saved, is being saved, and will be saved.⁸⁸

The virtue of hope, a virtue infused by the gracious initiative of God with which we cooperate, reminds us that we are not alone on this journey. Progress in sanctification is not beyond the reach of sinners because it is, as Paul says, cooperation with God who is working in us (Phil. 2:12b-13). We will not arrive in this lifetime, but we must never give up striving.

Conclusion

The Protestant tendency to downplay the role of works in the economy of salvation is largely due to a misunderstanding of the cooperating grace of sanctification. The Thomist understanding of hope offers Protestants a framework for keeping sanctification properly oriented toward the goal of holiness, stalling neither in the direction of presumption nor despair. Hope-filled sanctification characterizes the already-but-not-yet nature of the Christian life by affirming both God’s ongoing work of making us holy, and our cooperation with that work.

⁸⁷ Pieper, 128.

⁸⁸ I am indebted to my colleague Dr. Lyle Bierma at Calvin Theological Seminary for this phrase.