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LUTHER, WORKS, AND NORTH AMERICAN EVANGELICALISM

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The Reformation had a dramatic impact on both the theology and ecclesiology of the Church. Many such changes are obvious, as doctrine and church practice are easy to track. Some others, however, are subtler. This paper will ask the following question: Has Martin Luther's strong focus on the doctrine of justification by faith alone contributed to a reluctance on the part of present-day North American evangelical Christians to do good works?

In order to consider this question, I will first look at what Martin Luther *really* said, with very brief consideration given to the ecclesiological environment into which he spoke. Then, I will consider the "state" of good works in the North American evangelical church today. Because of the dearth of research in this area our work will be necessarily subjective; however we will consider the evidence and see what conclusions we may reasonably draw.

Before we can consider the present-day impact of Luther's words we must have an accurate understanding of what he had to say on the issue of faith and works. Perhaps no work outlines his position as clearly as *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520). Luther makes it clear that the only thing needed for the Christian life is the Word of God:

You may ask, "What then is the Word of God, and how shall it be used, since there are so many words of God?" I answer: The apostle explains this in Romans 1. The Word is the gospel of God concerning his Son, who was made flesh, suffered, rose from the dead and was glorified through the Spirit who sanctifies... Faith alone is the saving and efficacious use of the Word of God, according to Rom. 10 [:9]: "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."¹

Further in the document Luther firmly positions this doctrine against the notion of works:

¹ Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian" 1520, in *A Reformation Reader: Primary Texts with Introductions*, ed. Denis R. Janz (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 102.

It is clear, then, that a Christian has all that he needs in faith and needs no works to justify him; and if he has no need of works, he has no need of the law; and if he has no need of the law, surely he is free from the law.²

Here Luther clearly and succinctly articulates that justification in Christ is only by faith, and works will not earn us our salvation. This distinction is important. Nowhere has Luther indicated that he is against good works, or that Christians should not practice them. In fact, he was very much concerned with what came *after* justification. Elsewhere we read that Luther had charged some with being “fine Easter preachers, but very poor Pentecost preachers” because they preached “solely about the redemption of Jesus Christ,” but ignored the issue of “sanctification by the Holy Spirit.”³ One may assume that evidence of such “sanctification” would surely include a change of behaviour toward others, i.e. good works.

While this assumption on its own may appear speculative, elsewhere Luther clarifies his view that faith is a “divine work” which should therefore result in changed people.

O, this faith is a living, busy, active, powerful thing! It is impossible that it should not be ceaselessly doing that which is good. It does not even ask whether good works should be done; but before the question can be asked, it has done them, and is constantly doing them. But he who does not do such works, is a man without faith.⁴

Here Luther does not equivocate, and ironically his words would seem to be straight from the Epistle of James. Luther’s position is clear: We are justified by faith alone. However, “such a man becomes without constraint willing and eager to do good to

² Ibid.

³ Martin Luther, “On the Councils and the Church”, in *Bach Among the Theologians*, Jaroslav Pelikan (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 8.

⁴ Martin Luther, “Preface to St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans”, in *Great Voices of the Reformation*, ed. Harry Emerson Fosdick (New York: The Modern Library, 1952), 121.

everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer all manner of ills, in order to please and glorify God, who has shown toward him such grace.”⁵

We have seen in certain of his writings that Luther was very clear in speaking of both justification by faith alone and the resulting natural desire of the person so justified to demonstrate both ongoing sanctification and gratefulness to God through the practice of good works. Why then has he in other writings ignored the issue of works, or even seemed to dismiss it out of hand? Perhaps his work against Karlstadt provides a partial explanation. Luther was very concerned with keeping the two issues separate because “more depends on the teaching of faith and a good conscience than on the teaching of good works.” He went to explain that when works are not evident in someone’s life, that person could be counseled on the error of their ways; however, the opposite is not true. If works are emphasized over faith, “then nothing can be good and there is neither counsel nor help.”⁶

We must remember the conditions that helped bring about the Reformation. The abuses of the Confessional and the selling of Indulgences are but two examples of how the Church had clearly elevated works to “justification status,” and decisive action was needed in order to correct this imbalance. Kierkegaard correctly points out that it was not long before some used this strong language from Luther to their advantage. Note this parody:

‘Excellent! This is something for us. Luther says: It depends on faith alone. He himself does not say that his life expresses works, and since he is now dead it is no longer an actuality. So we take his words, his doctrine—and we are free from all works—long live Luther! *Wer nicht liebt Weiber, Wein, Gesang / Er wird ein*

⁵ Ibid., 122.

⁶ Martin Luther, “Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments” 1525, in *Karlstadt’s Battle With Luther: Documents in a Liberal-Radical Debate*, ed. Ronald J. Sider (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 94.

Narr sein Leben lang [Who loves not women, wine and song / He is a fool his whole life long].⁷

Whether Luther was “misunderstood” intentionally or accidentally, it is possible to see how a singular focus on justification by faith could create confusion, and contribute to a misdirected view of works.

Clearly, this confusion continues today. Dallas Willard recently made this observation:

In most churches we’re not only saved by grace, we’re paralyzed by it. We’re afraid to do anything that might be a ‘work.’ The funny thing is we will preach to people for an hour that they can’t do anything to be saved, and then sing to them for half an hour trying to get them to do something. This is confusing. People need to see that action is a receptacle for grace, not a substitute for it. Grace is God acting in our lives to do things we can’t do on our own. Grace is not opposed to effort; it’s opposed to earning.⁸

Here we are, several centuries removed from Luther, still trying to figure out the distinctions between “earning” and “effort.” But, is this a fair assessment? Is this indicative of the state of North American evangelicalism today, or just an isolated example?

Ron Sider, an evangelical academic who has spent much of his career researching the disconnect between evangelicals and works, has recognized that “[u]nfortunately, even our best theologians sometimes overstate the wonderful doctrine of forgiveness of sins.” He goes on to connect this error with the important work of Luther to “free the

⁷ Soren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination: Judge For Yourself*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Long and Edna H. Long (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 16.

⁸ “The Apprentices”, in *Leadership Journal*, Summer 2005 [journal on-line]; available from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2005/003/2.20.html>; Internet; accessed 1 February 2006.

gospel from works righteousness.” However, Sider recognizes that such a focus ““taken by itself easily leads to a neglect of sanctification and holy, obedient living.””⁹

Perhaps nowhere is this pervasive error more evident than in the words of one of the most popular pastors in the evangelical world. Rick Warren’s 2002 book, *The Purpose-Driven Life*¹⁰, has been the best selling new book in the world since 2003. Between that title and his earlier work, *The Purpose-Driven Church*,¹¹ Warren has sold more than 26 million books. Over 30,000 American churches have participated in his “40 Days of Purpose” program¹². To say that Rick Warren has a huge impact on and perhaps even defines North American evangelicalism is an understatement.

After visiting Rwanda in 2003, Warren looked at scripture again, he says, “with new eyes.”

I found those 2,000 verses on the poor. How did I miss that? I went to Bible college, two seminaries, and I got a doctorate. How did I miss God’s compassion for the poor? I was not seeing all the purposes of God. The church is the body of Christ. The hands and feet have been amputated and we’re just a big mouth, known more for what we’re against.¹³

This is strong language. It must be noted that this new revelation of God’s compassion for the poor has come since the onset of the 40 Days phenomenon. In other words millions of people are reading a book that does not reflect this new thinking for Warren. While care for the poor is broader than the simpler issue of “good works”, it surely includes it.

⁹ Ronald J. Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like The Rest of the World?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: BakerBooks, 2005), 58.

¹⁰ Richard Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2002).

¹¹ Richard Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1995).

¹² All statistics from Timothy C. Morgan, “Purpose Driven in Rwanda,” *Christianity Today*, (October 2005).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 34.

This paper is not meant to be an indictment of North American evangelicalism. That said, the evidence is discouraging.¹⁴ What is perhaps less clear is whether or not we may fairly connect this current state of affairs with the focus of much of Martin Luther's writing. Luther himself was very clear on the subject: A life justified by faith should be exemplified by good works. However, given the environment he was working in Luther felt the need to focus much of his attention on the justification issue. As we fast-forward to the state of North American evangelicalism at the beginning of the 21st century, the evidence seems to indicate that we may fairly connect the two issues. This is unfortunate, and one is left to wonder if another swing of the pendulum is required to correct this imbalance.

¹⁴ See also Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving From Affluence to Generosity* (Dallas: W Publishing Group, 1997).

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