

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

TOWARDS A PROTESTANT DOCTRINE OF WORKS


*"My brothers! What good is it for someone to say,
'I have faith,' if his actions do not prove it?"
James 2:14*

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*"My brothers! What good is it for
someone to say, 'I have faith,'
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James 2:14*

My aim today is to attempt to correct a correction. You must fight fire with fire, we say. Meet an extreme with an extreme. If a row boat is capsizing to the left you don't help matters by shifting to the middle, you must move clean over to the other side. History richly illustrates the soundness of this counsel.

Here on Reformation Sunday, 1973, I should like to nail one thesis to the door that guards your mind. It is this: The Reformers in their zeal to establish the primacy of faith in Christian experience failed to adequately develop a doctrine of works. They were guilty of an over-correction.

* * *

Not for an instant would I minimize what the Reformers recovered for us! Just as Peter and Paul freed men and women up from a soul-stifling preoccupation with legalistic minutiae, so Luther and Calvin freed up the Christian church from a joyless "works-righteousness." The church at that time had interposed itself as a broker of God's grace. Indulgences, which Roland Bainton describes as "the bingo of the 16th century," were rife in Luther's day.

"The just shall live by faith." This was the watchword of the Reformation. This conviction seized Martin Luther as an Augustinian monk when his studies for a doctorate took him deep into Paul's letters, especially Romans and Galatians. The way in which his discovery affected him he tells in this heartening way, "Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that 'The just shall live by faith.' Then I grasped that

the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon, I felt myself to be re-born and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the "justice of God" had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love."¹

John Calvin, though perhaps more cerebral and less demonstrative, was nonetheless happily committed to the same certainty. He wrote: "He will be justified by faith, who, being excluded from the righteousness of works, apprehends by faith the righteousness of Christ, invested in which, he appears, in the sight of God, not as sinner but as a righteous man."²

Only those who believe can obey. "Nothing makes a man good," said Luther, "except faith, and nothing makes a man evil except unbelief."³ He doubtless found support in that judgment from the word that Jesus spoke that day when a crowd gathered and asked, "What must we do to be doing the works of God?" Jesus answered, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent." (Jn. 6:28-29) The primacy of faith in Christian experience.

This recovered truth fell on a less than excited Christendom like a long awaited benediction. God is not some master computer keeping running accounts of our moral debits and credits. God is not a policeman looking to arrest us and see us sentenced. God is for us. He is a merciful Father. We may come as we are. The merit system is out. Grace is in! The All-Terrible is the All-Merciful too!

Rapture has attended the proclamation of this truth everywhere. To discover the acceptance of God is to pass from mere religion into what the New Testament means by life in Jesus Christ. Well might we frisk the dictionary for words to hint the wonder of it all. Why, it's like being lost -- then found. It's like being in the darkest night and discovering

light too bright for telling. It's like being in jail and suddenly released. It's like being dead and brought to life again. It's like being born a second time and finding all things new. The primacy of faith is what sets the bells to ringing in the New Testament. God be praised for any and all who have preserved that truth for our believing!

* * *

But the correction made by the Reformers was achieved at the expense of another vital truth. God wills us to live useful and productive lives. It falls primarily to the Epistle of James to make this counterpoint in the New Testament. In the crisp language of Today's English Version, James writes, "My brothers! What good is it for someone to say, 'I have faith,' if his actions do not prove it?"

No wonder Luther had a problem accepting this letter as canonical. In the preface to his New Testament he wrote, "The gospel and the first epistle of St. John, St. Paul's epistles, especially those to the Romans, Galatians and Ephesians; and St. Peter's first epistle, are the books which show Christ to you. They teach everything you need to know for your salvation, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or hear any other teaching. In comparison with these the epistle of James is an epistle full of straw, because it contains nothing evangelical."⁴

Protestantism, I insist, under the influence of Luther and Calvin, has not dealt adequately with the point that James makes. We need to make room for works in Protestant theology. Our failure to do this shows itself in at least two ways.

* * *

First, I am concerned that we give inordinate attention to how one becomes a Christian and insufficient attention to what one is to do once he is a

Christian. Evangelical Christianity celebrates with ecstasy the entrance into the Christian life. It has a fixation on the starting gate. It is more interested in obstetrics than pediatrics or geriatrics -- that is, it is more interested in how new life begins than how it matures or ages. It is fascinated more by the dynamics of guilt and forgiveness than the dynamics of command and obedience.

This summer we had an opportunity to hear preach in this pulpit William Muehl, the distinguished professor of homiletics at Yale Divinity School. In his book, All The Damned Angels, Dr. Muehl presents a sermon on the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. He entitled the sermon, "The Cult of the Publican." In that message he agrees that it is praiseworthy when a man goes up into the temple humbly, maintains a respectful distance from the altar, casts his eyes down and prays modestly, "God, be merciful to me a sinner."

But Muehl goes on to raise some searching questions. How many times had this man approached the temple in that manner? Was his piety a habit? Did he enjoy fresh beginnings without continuing on into anything significant? According to the record, "he went down to his house justified rather than the other." (Lk. 18 14) What did he do when he got home? Was his response to God predictable and neatly stylized?

There is both whimsy and point in the way Muehl puts it: "Sometimes in my mind's eye I can see this Publican raising his children to follow in his footsteps. 'Now kiddies, when you enter the temple you must on no account approach the altar. Stand at a humble distance, and for pity's sake, don't raise your eyes. Bring your arm up in a full swing and strike the breast just below the collarbone. Now all together. Let's take it once more from the top. And this time make your daddy proud of you.'"⁵

Let it be said in fairness to Luther that he

stated on the subject that our faith in Christ does not free us from works but from false opinions concerning works. But this mild qualifier does not offset the basic damage done.

A correction needs to be made on the correction of the Reformers. There are multiplied tens of thousands of Christians in this land alone who fully believe that they are justified by faith, but their behavior makes no commensurate difference in the ongoing life of this republic. Christianity is not primarily a decision but a life. God's purpose in forgiving us is to return us to our true vocation as His fellow-workers here in this creation.

Flash back to the startling illustration that James uses. "Suppose there are brothers or sisters who need clothes and don't have enough to eat. What good is there in your saying to them, 'God bless you! Keep warm and eat well!' -- if you don't give them the necessities of life? So it is with faith. If it is alone and has no actions with it, then it is dead." (Jas 2:14-17)

All the action isn't at the starting gate! How pitiful it would be to see a man come screaming through the city saying, "I'm born, I'm born." We'd say to him, "Good. What now?" Or to see a released prisoner running through the streets saying, "I'm pardoned, I'm pardoned." "Great. Praise God. Where now?"

I remember a cartoon that showed a returned Prodigal sitting down with his family to a sumptuous feast. The single tag line was given to the father: "Son, this is the third fatted calf we've killed for you, when are you going to settle down?" In Jesus' parable, when the Prodigal returned he wanted to work. "Make me as one of your hired servants." The father, however, received him back as a son. But can you imagine what would have happened to him, to his brother, to his father and to all the others

if he had simply gone around the farm shouting, "I'm back, I'm back." "So, you're back." In time he'd have to milk those cows, wouldn't he? Or press some olives. Or get the barley in. Redemption is tied to creation. It is not God's interest to simply collect souls out of the world but to see the whole of life redeemed.

* * *

My second concern is this: We belittle confession by not connecting it to works. Confession is a vital part of the Christian life -- no matter what liberal Christians may say to the contrary. To indicate our belief in the importance of confession we have a Prayer of Corporate Confession in our worship week by week coupled with an Assurance of Pardon. That action in our service is likely more symbolic and suggestive than real, for honest confession is deeply personal and should, I believe, be heard by another human being who has also opened his life to the grace of God.

Our Roman Catholic friends are wise in their cure of souls by insisting on confession. Martin Luther believed in private confession. He called it a cure without an equal for distressed consciences. What I'm interested in having you see is the way in which our Roman Catholic friends have tied penance to confession. Penance, according to the "Baltimore Catechism," is "a sacrament in which the sins committed after baptism are forgiven."

Question No. 800 in that same catechism asks, "Why does the priest give us a penance after confession?" Notice carefully, "The priest give us a penance after confession that we may satisfy God for the temporal punishment due to our sins."⁶ Mercy at the divine level does not rule out the need to make things right on earth. One form of penance frequently prescribed by priests is "corporal works of mercy." What are these? "We may briefly state the corporal works of mercy by saying that we are obliged to help

the poor in all their forms of want."⁷

I've taken the long way around to suggest that however adequate it may be theologically for us to confess our sins and be absolved by an assurance of pardon, it is seldom enough psychologically! My years in the pastorate convince me that when people confess some deeply troubling sin, they need something more than a word. They need to be directed to a course of action that will help to make things right.

We tend to shy away from this. It is too hot for us because it is Roman and not Protestant. Meanwhile, we go on suffering from insufficiently exorcised guilt. I have no doubt whatsoever that part of St. Paul's zeal as a Christian was born out of a desire to make up for his earlier persecution of Christians. What's wrong with that?

I am equally sure that much of Peter's latter day consecration to God resulted from an awareness of his earlier denials of Christ. He had some making up to do. What's wrong with that? Repentance and works go hand-in-hand. Jesus Himself said we ought to "bear fruit that befits repentance." (Mat. 3:8)

What I have in mind can happen at the personal and corporate levels. Imagine a man in his late forties who is utterly thoughtless of his mother and careless of her welfare. While charging toward the top in his chosen profession he simply has no time for her. His mother dies. He is stricken with all kinds of remorse. The pastor can tell him to commit it all to God, forget it and go on. I suggest that it would be more helpful to tell this man in the name of God that he ought to go out and adopt an elderly woman in his mother's place and be a son to her. Why not?

Or, here is a self-made man who is charmed by his own capacities. On his way to the top he thanked no one. "What have I wrought!" is his only theme. Suddenly he experiences a moment of truth. He sees that

he reached the pinnacle with the aid of many people whom he never thanked. Now he's telling his pastor how sorry he is for this reproachable pride. Why shouldn't the minister say to him, "I communicate to you the forgiveness of God, but also I want you to write a note of thanks every day you live to someone who has helped you, whether in the distant past or the nearer present."

George Buttrick tells of a wealthy woman in his parish here in New York years ago who by her own subsequent admission was mean and quarrelsome and selfish through most of her early and middle life. She confessed her wretchedness of soul. George Buttrick spoke the forgiving word but he also said to this woman, "I want you here at the church with your chauffeur every Tuesday. I want you to find out which of our members are in hospital, and I want you to visit every one of them and, where possible, take them some flowers." The woman did it. She did it week after week and year after year until toward the end she was known as "the little lady of the hospitals." What's wrong with that?

What's wrong with making up at the corporate level too? What's wrong with a dominant white community, in the spirit of repentance, making it up to black people. What's wrong with that? Why do we have so much trouble as a nation coming round to the rightness of reparations. What's wrong with our doing something for the American Indian besides saying, "We're sorry." Why can't we make it up to him? What's wrong with our telling the prisoners up and down this land that we have made a travesty of their rehabilitation and trying to make it up to them. Forgiveness must be in more than words and feeling. It needs to be supported by good works.

We are not saved by deeds, I know. But we are saved for deeds, aren't we? Didn't Jesus tell us that we were to let our light shine before men so that they may see our good works and glorify our Father who is

in heaven! (Mat. 5:16) Paul speaks of good works as those things which God has ordained that we should walk in them. (Eph. 2:10)

To verbalize repentance and to know ourselves forgiven simply on the basis of an inner sentiment and an outer word is to indulge in what Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace." One of Harry Emerson Fosdick's perceptive litanies carries this exchange:

"From all claiming of faith while we have
not works;
From taking comfort in the luxury of Thy grace
while we forget the necessity of
Thy righteousness,
Good Lord, deliver us."⁸

Only those who believe can obey. But it is also true that only those who obey can believe. My brothers and sisters, "what good is it for someone to say, 'I have faith,' if his actions do not prove it?"

CLOSING PRAYER

*To Thy gracious review and judgement
We commit ourselves, O God.*

*Help us to put it all together, lest in
Loving Thee we neglect our neighbor,
Or in meeting our neighbor's need
Our faith in Thee fall short.*

*Through Jesus Christ we pray -
for His sake and for ours.*

Amen.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Bainton, Roland, Here I Stand, pp. 49-50, Abingdon Press, 1950.
2. Calvin, John, Institutes of The Christian Religion, Vol. I, p. 793, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia.
3. Kerr, Hugh Thomas, Jr., (Ed.) A Compend of Luther's Theology, p. 100, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia.
4. Barclay, William, The Letters of James and Peter, p. 7, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1958.
5. Muehl, William, All The Damned Angels, p. 24, Pilgrim Press Book, Philadelphia, 1972.
6. Kinkead, Thomas L., A Catechism of Christian Doctrine, p. 168, Benziger Brothers, Inc., New York, 1921.
7. Ibid., pp- 172-173.
8. Fosdick, Harry Emerson, Pilgrim Hymnal, p. 12, The Pilgrim Press, Boston, 1958.

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