

An Emphasis on Works

Since Luther's day, people have accused Lutherans of de-emphasising good works. Who will do good works if we do not have to do good works to go to heaven? Why should anyone do good works? Since Luther's day, Lutherans have answered that we are simply putting good works into the right place - as the result, not the cause of salvation. Salvation by Christ alone, apart from our works, is the only motivation for true good works.

The accusation is not an attack on Lutheranism. It is an attack on the Bible and Christianity. For Lutheranism is simply Biblical Christianity. The accusation is an attack on Jesus Christ, for it denies that He is the Saviour. It makes us our own saviours and our own gods, trusting ourselves to climb up to heaven by our own efforts. It is idolatry.

The Gospel is that Jesus Christ, true God and true Man, has kept the Law of God perfectly for us and then suffered and died on the cross for our sins in our place. He did the job perfectly, as He said, "It is finished" (John 19:30). We are saved by God's grace alone - only because Jesus has appeased God's anger against our sin (grace is the opposite of anger). We are saved through the Gospel (also expressed in Baptism and Communion). The Gospel brings us the blessings Christ has earned for us. It creates and preserves the faith (trust) that alone receives forgiveness, life, and salvation for Christ's sake.

Salvation is entirely apart from our works. The Bible says that in many ways throughout. Paul says it in so many words (Romans 3:19-4:8; Ephesians 2:8-9). Anyone who teaches that good works are necessary for salvation is opposed to the Bible and the Gospel, to Christ and God, to the prophets and apostles, and to the true Church at all times. For all Christians trust Christ alone for salvation, not themselves or their works (Galatians 5:4).

Who will do good works? Those who believe that they have been saved without works will do good works. They alone will do true good works, for they alone have the true motivation for good works. Full and free salvation by Christ alone is that unique motivation. Christ died for us so that we would live for Him (2 Corinthians 5:15).

If we did good works to earn our way to heaven, they would not be good works. They may be outwardly good, but they would be inwardly selfish. We would be loving and helping ourselves, not other people. We would be using others to get something for ourselves.

1 John 4:19 says it all: "We love Him, because He first loved us." The context explains that love starts with God loving us. Our love is motivated by God's love for us in Christ. It is God's work that we begin to love Him and our neighbour, grow in that love, and do good works that proceed from love. God should be praised and glorified for our good works (Matthew 5:16). But He will still be pleased to commend us for them (Matthew 25:31-40; 1 Corinthians 4:5).

The Bible says that God loves us first and we love Him in return. The works-for-salvation teaching says that we have to love God first and He will love us in return. But God's love is never "in return," always "in the first place." Our love is in return for His love in Christ - by His power, not our own; to His glory, not our own; for our neighbour's benefit, not our own.

That is clear in the Bible, but the fallen mind reverses it. To keep it straight, remember that good works do not result in salvation. Salvation results in good works! When we recite Ephesians 2:8-9, we should include verse 10. We are saved by grace through faith, not by or through works. But we are God's workmanship, made anew in Christ, to do good works.

Preaching that we must save ourselves by good works cannot produce a single selfless work of love. At most, it can promote outward works from inward selfishness. Preaching that we are saved by Christ alone produces real good works. God's love in Christ is not only the example but also the motivation. The Gospel is God's power to bring us not only to faith but also to love.

It moves us to love God, to be grateful to God, and to want to serve God. That means wanting to serve others, whom God also loves, for whom Christ also died - that is, all our neighbours.

It is pretty hard to hate another person if we remember that God loves him just as God loves us and that Christ has died for him just as Christ has died for us. That is how the Gospel moves us to love and serve not only God but also man. That is how true good works are produced.

A proper emphasis on good works still means putting the main and major emphasis on Christ and His love and works for us.