

Faith versus Good Works

An old debate re-examined and an alternative suggested.

Presently visiting Britain, and both by his obvious desire to reach out to people of other faiths and certain things he has said, Pope John Paul II has raised hopes amongst certain Christians of a reapproachment between Catholics and Protestants; hopes that have not, perhaps, been so keenly felt since the days of one of his recent predecessors, Pope John XXIII. Pope John Paul II was, for example, unexpectedly conciliatory during his visit in 1980 to Germany when in addressing a gathering of Lutheran leaders he spoke of Catholics necessarily sharing the blame for Luther's dissent and the onset of the reformation. "We must do what unites" he told the assembled leaders. "We owe that to God and the world".

Many things, some more important than others, divide the Catholic and Protestant Churches. In England they have had a special Commission looking into these, hoping to identify points where agreement might be reached, so bringing the Churches together and healing a rift of now more than four hundred years standing. Not only are some of those differences more important than others, however, some are better known and better understood than others. And what is, at least for the average person in the street, one of those lesser known disputes goes right to the heart of the differences and was at the centre of the 16th century schism which saw the Catholic Church fragment and Protestantism come into being.

I refer to the dispute concerning the place of faith and good works in salvation. It had been, and it was later reaffirmed to be Catholic teaching that people could do good works that earned them, or merited them, a place in heaven. Mind you, it was not, and is not, any kind of good works that are involved here. Only good works performed "in God". Nevertheless the concept that people can do works which help merit them salvation is there. Part of a decree of the Council of Trent, on this point, is usefully quoted here:

"If anyone shall say that the just ought not to expect and hope for an eternal recompense from God . . . for the good works which have been performed in God . . . let him be anathema."

Martin Luther, with whom the reformation had its starting point, rejected this teaching. He could not agree that man could in any way do anything from himself, for all that he might be stirred up by Christ, such as to merit salvation. After all, is it not said in the Gospels, "No one can receive anything except what is given from heaven". (John 3:27 RSV). Man, said Luther, can do nothing. Nothing at all. Salvation, as he saw it, is not earned or merited. It is a free gift, bestowed through faith. Part of the Confession of Augsburg, dated 1530, and stating the Lutheran position, reads, where this matter is concerned.

"Men cannot be justified in the sight of God by their own strength, merits or works, but they are justified freely on account of Christ through faith, when they believe that they are received into grace and that their sins are remitted on account of Christ who made satisfaction for sins on our behalf by his death. God imputes this faith for righteousness in his own right."

And still with the Augsburg Confession:

"Our works cannot reconcile us to God, or merit remission of sins and grace and justification. This we obtain only by faith, when we believe that we are received into grace on account of Christ."

Thus, the two positions stated. One insisting on a place for good works, good works, which will be rewarded; which help to earn a man his salvation. The other position insisting that man can do nothing; nothing at all. Salvation is entirely a free gift bestowed by God.

We perhaps wonder today how this subject could have aroused the passions it did or been at the centre of a split of such proportions, as it was. At the same time the whole question of man's relationship with God, and the part man plays, or doesn't play, in coming to salvation, is raised here. The Catholic position, on the one hand, finds a place for good works and for the meriting of salvation. The Lutheran and, generally speaking, Protestant position, insists that man can do nothing. He is saved entirely through faith.

Well aware, as he was, of the thinking and teaching represented in these two positions, Swedenborg dissented from them both. He wrote, that it is true men can do nothing from himself. At the same time he can and must do something. There is indeed a role he must play. It is not a matter of waiting with arms folded or hands hanging down. There are certain gifts and powers from God which every person possesses and man must use these, knowing, acknowledging and believing, they are not his own, and yet using them as if they are his own.

Man must, for example, try to do good, knowing that the power to do good is from God and that if any good results, it is from the Lord and not from himself. Then again, man must strive to reject and overcome his evils, knowing and believing that the strength to overcome them can only come from the Lord. It is as if he does these things from himself, but he knows in his heart that he can only do them from God. God gives us power. God gives us strength. God gives us purpose. God gives us resolve. And we use these, as **if** they are our own.

We touch upon here something very precious about God and about His dealings with us which has for ages been overlooked, perhaps never really understood, which has been brought into focus again in the teaching given in Swedenborg's theological writings. God gives us our life to use as if it were our very own. It's not, of course, but that's how it appears to be. Indeed, that's how it has got to appear to be. He also gives us the power to do good which He requires us to use as if it were our very own. It's not our own. But we are to use it as if it were.

Here again, He gives us the strength to overcome our evils; a power from Him which we use as if it were our very own. This is the way it seems. The thing is that this is the only way we can enter into a freely chosen relationship with our Lord and Maker.

It gets back to the kind of relationship God wants with us, not a relationship imposed on us by Him, but a relationship which we have chosen and must want as much as He wants; a relationship of cooperation. It is true, as Martin Luther said, that man can do nothing from himself. But this doesn't mean he does nothing at all; that he waits, or simply has faith. He must use the powers and the strength available to him from God as if these powers and that strength were his own.

It is possible to do good which is not from self, or meritorious, but from the Lord. It seems to be from ourselves, but we know and acknowledge in our hearts that it is from the Lord. It is also possible to shun evils from a strength which we seem to have ourselves but which, once again, is from the Lord. We have to make a decision. We have to make an initial effort. We have to indicate a willingness and desire to do these things. There has to be cooperation on our part. Once it is there, the Lord is able to work through us, supplying all the strength we need or doing the good we are striving to achieve.

Such a relationship of cooperation, the Lord supplying the strength we use, as if it were our own, or doing the good we seem to be doing from ourselves, is highlighted in the Scriptures. In the second Book of Kings, Chapter 13, the prophet, who represents the Lord, laying his hand over the hand of the king, Joash as he drew back his bow and shot his arrows. The story reads, in part:

"Now Elisha was suffering from the illness from which he died. Joash king of Israel went down to see him and wept over him. "My father! My father!" he cried "The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" Elisha said, "Get a bow and some arrows," and he did so. "Take the bow in your hands," he said to the king of Israel. When he had taken it, Elisha put his hands on the king's hands. "Open the east window," he said, and he opened it. "Shoot!" Elisha said, and he shot. "The Lord's arrow of victory, the arrow of victory over Syria."

It's up to us, figuratively speaking, to take our bow, to place the arrows in it, to use and direct it, realising and acknowledging all the while that the strength from which we do these things comes to us, and can only come to us, from the Lord.

In his major work, "*True Christian Religion*", Swedenborg wrote:

"No one, by his own power and strength can purify himself from evils, and yet this cannot be effected without man's power and strength, used (from the Lord) as if they were his own. Unless these were in him as his own no one would be able to fight against the flesh and its lusts, which, nevertheless, is required of all."

We agree that man cannot do good or overcome evil **from himself**. But, as was said earlier, this does not mean that man is to do nothing. We must do something. We must co-operate with the Lord in His purposes for us. We must shun our evils **as if** the strength to do so were our own yet knowing it is the Lord's. We must seek to do good works as if we were the initiator and origin of them, yet acknowledging that if we do anything good at all, it can only be from the Lord.

Thus it is not a matter of credit accruing to us or of meriting salvation. The credit and the merit are all the Lord's. He is everything. We are nothing. Yet we have the power from Him to co-operate with Him in His purposes for us. We must use it, if we are to know the salvation and happiness with which He wishes to bless our lives.

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