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Righteousness and Salvation

A Case Study of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and the Ethiopian Evangelical Church of Mekane Yesus

Tibebu Senbetu

Introduction

Some of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) and the Ethiopian Evangelical Church of Mekane Yesus (EECMY) members' understanding of righteousness and salvation fits into neither Pauline nor Jacobite teaching.¹ This short paper examines whether Christians in Ethiopia today correctly understand the whole account of Scripture about righteousness and salvation. It also analyzes what the Scriptures and the Lutheran teachings say on the subject. Knowingly or unknowingly, the full biblical message on soteriology has been neglected by some Christians, which has resulted in a confused understanding of righteousness and salvation. Finally, this paper attempts to bridge the gap between the EOTC and the EECMY members' perception of righteousness and salvation based on the Scriptures and the Lutheran teachings.

This paper is based on several sources, including the author's personal experience as a former member in the EOTC and as an ordained minister in the EECMY.

The EOTC and the EECMY Teaching on Righteousness and Salvation

It appears that righteousness and salvation by faith alone through the work of Jesus is strange to many members of the EOTC. Knowingly or unknowingly, they have rejected the notion of *sola fide* as the only means to righteousness and salvation—even if they acknowledge that the Son of God died for sinners. Many of their teachings and sermons emphasize a righteousness that is acquired by great efforts made by the adherents in addition to their faith in Christ.² The EOTC believes and teaches that when faith and work are both found in a Christian life, they bring forth salvation.³ They believe that God's grace enables them to balance faith and good works in their life.⁴ Some say that it is impossible for a person to be righteous by one's deeds. Such people assert that righteousness comes from the merciful God himself through grace; however, practically they still tend towards works-righteousness and salvation by works.⁵

The concept of ጸጵቅ (*Tsadik*), meaning righteousness, is linked to one's

good work performed for others. When a person is seen doing good works for others, he or she is regarded as a righteous person. The good works are demonstrations of the member's practical concern and physical support, which they can show in acts of kindness to the poor. This also shapes non-Christians' understanding of the term "righteousness" in Ethiopian society. These acts are treated as meritorious, and it is believed that such acts bring them righteousness and salvation.⁶

The EOTC also regards separation from the world through monastic life as a righteous work. Monks and nuns are considered more righteous than ordinary members of the church. It is believed that monks and nuns have disregarded the temptations of this world so well that they have come out of the world to fully submit themselves to the will of God.

Members of the EOTC observe the seven sacraments and pray to the saints in the hope that they will be assisted in finding favor in the eyes of God so that they can be forgiven, accepted, and become righteous.⁷ Even those who profess that they believe in Jesus and consider Jesus's work on the cross as the only gate for salvation still believe that there are many other things which believers should do in order to be righteous and saved at the end. Such works include the seven sacraments, the intercession of the saints, fasting, almsgiving, visiting monasteries, confession of private sins to monks and priests, veneration of saints, and all kinds of striving to shun fleshly desires. It is in this framework that one can think of righteousness and salvation as something not fully grasped simply by "faith alone."

Thus, EOTC's presupposition regarding human performance playing a role in righteousness and salvation twists religious practice in the course of regular life as a Christian.

On the contrary, the EECMY's theology focuses on the forensic aspects of righteousness and salvation as declared by God on the basis of an individual's faith in Christ and in what Christ accomplished on their behalf. The need to live righteously after receiving righteous standing in the sight of God is not denied absolutely, but greater emphasis seems to be given to how one comes to salvation by faith alone.

It is often thought that Pauline soteriological teaching receives more emphasis in the EECMY. But it is hard to tell if justice is done to the whole of Paul's doctrine. Justification and righteousness in the EECMY is primarily the judicial act of the gracious God to pardon the believing sinner. According to EECMY members, what believers did before and do after conversion supplies nothing to their salvation. The concept of righteousness is mainly understood as a public confession of sins and commitment made by individuals to follow Christ.

The EECMY differs from the EOTC's perception on righteousness and salvation in their rejection of any contribution from the side of believers towards achieving their righteousness and salvation. The EECMY also refrains from giving the slightest credit to the virtue of a believer's cooperation with God's grace that

In this situation, we cannot neglect the necessity of giving clear ethical guidance to members in the midst of moral confusion all over the world.

In this situation, we cannot neglect the necessity of giving clear ethical guidance to members in the midst of moral confusion all over the world. One might say that some in the EOTC are in danger of being legalist while some in the EECMY are in danger of being antinomian.

Luther's Theology as a Bridge between the EOTC and the EECMY

In his teaching about the theology of the cross, Luther “presented a new conceptual framework for thinking about God and the human creature” against theologians of glory.⁸ The Ethiopian Evangelical Churches’ theology of righteousness and salvation should be developed and shaped by Luther’s theology of the cross, because the Scripture tells that the cross is the only way God wanted to reveal himself and reverse the fall. “It [the theology of the cross] refines the Christian’s focus on God and on what it means to be human,”⁹ rather than focusing on human’s ability to do good for God and attempt to earn his favor for righteousness and salvation. Robert Kolb says,

The theology of the cross aims at bestowing a new identity upon sinners, setting aside the old identity, by killing it, so that good human performance can flow out of this new identity that is comprehended in trust toward God.... When we attempt to use our decisions and performance to please God—or some created substitute we have made into an idol—we are taking them out of their proper sphere and laying upon them responsibility for making us God-pleasing. They break under the weight of this falsely placed responsibility.¹⁰

Luther correctly argued that believers’ righteousness and salvation is the result of Christ’s atoning work on the cross, which God—out of his love, grace, mercy, and

would contribute to their justification (Eph 2:8–9, Ti 3:5, Gal 2–3). However, sometimes EECMY appears not to pay much attention to other texts which instruct believers to obey God’s law and grow in their Christian faith as disciples of Christ who are re-created in him through baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

Some young EECMY members have misunderstood Luther’s profound theology of *sola fide* and *sola gratia*. They have become careless regarding moral life after being saved.

divine favor—granted to people who have faith in Christ. The theology of the cross correctly diverts our attention from what we do for God, seeking to earn his favor, to what God has done for us.

After our re-creation in Christ we should seek to do good (Eph 2:10). Kolb says, “Children of the cross recognize the familial dimension of their new life in Christ.”¹¹ Through the death and resurrection of Christ, our sin is defeated. We are, however, living in the “already but not yet kingdom.” We are not yet completely dead to sin and alive to God.¹² The law reminds us that we are still sinners and cannot save ourselves. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit convicts us of our sins so that we may repent of our failure to love, fear, and trust God in our lives.

In many EECMY members’ understanding, salvation is the work of Jesus. Without faith in this work no one receives righteousness and salvation. However, for the biblical authors and Luther this faith is not a mere mental activity that is only related to human knowledge or public confession of Christ’s lordship. Many young members of the EECMY today perceive this. But they also realize that same confession anticipates works that flow from the same faith (Jas 2:14–26; Gal 5:19–21; 6:7–10, Rom 12:1–2). Here we may recall what Bonhoeffer said, “Only the one who believes, obeys,” and “only the one who obeys believes.”¹³

For Luther, justifying faith is nothing other than the confidence that believers maintain in the mercy of God, which remits all sins for the sake of Christ’s death on the cross.¹⁴ However, the same faith which justifies a sinner also leads the believer into a faithful life.

Luther’s profound slogans—*sola fide*, *sola gratia*, and *sola Scriptura*—came into being in opposition to the Roman Catholic Church’s notion of the divine-human cooperation to effect righteousness and salvation. Luther clearly attacked the idea of divine-human cooperation in the economy of salvation. For him, faith has as its object what God has done for human beings through the atoning works of Christ. Faith integrates believers into the saving event and makes them certain of their salvation since it has been achieved by God alone without any cooperation on the Christians’ part.¹⁵ However, Luther still rejects a faith of mere knowledge, saying that faith that is not fruitful or rejects obedience to God does nothing.¹⁶

Luther’s concept of the two kinds of human righteousness is worth mentioning here. The first kind of righteousness is called “passive righteousness,” which is the righteousness outside oneself. It is a forensic righteousness, which is imputed to believers as a free gift of God. This righteousness exists in the vertical realm, in our relationship with God.¹⁷ It is a righteousness that human beings cannot achieve by their own efforts. The second kind of righteousness is called “active righteousness.” Human beings can and should be concerned about their actions and efforts in this realm.¹⁸ Active righteousness maintains our positive relationships with other creatures as God’s stewards and children.¹⁹ Robert Kolb says, “This is our theology, by

which we teach a precise distinction between these two kinds of righteousness, the active and passive, so that morality and faith, works and grace, secular society and religion may not be confused. Both are necessary, but both must be kept within their own limits.”²⁰ It is these two inseparable but distinct kinds of righteousness that both the EOTC and the EECMY should retrieve from the hermeneutical principles of Lutheran theology.

Concluding Remarks

Confusion over the relationship of faith and good works and their role in righteousness and salvation is found in both EOTC and EECMY members. Members of both churches must perceive that for Paul, James, and Luther salvation is a divine past, present, and future declaration of righteousness and of one’s acceptance before God, which is received by a *living faith alone*.

James classifies a dead faith as simple assent to religious truth of the sort possessed even by demons. Such faith is useless for salvation. Paul and Luther by no means accept such dead and fruitless faith as genuine, although they know a sinless life is not possible in the “already not yet kingdom.” This is why Luther insisted on the need to regularly repent of our sins for failing to fear, love, and trust in God.

Indeed, the reason Luther emphasized “faith alone” was because medieval Roman Catholicism, much like the EOTC today, misunderstood the book of James as if the author promoted divine-human cooperation for righteousness and salvation. Thus, to address his context Luther emphasized Pauline theology. Luther does so without sacrificing the fullness of biblical theology regarding salvation and righteousness.

On the contrary, some young EECMY members have misunderstood *sola fide* and *sola gratia*. They downplay the necessity of moral life after salvation. In this situation, Luther’s teaching on two kinds of righteousness shows how people can practically live out their lives with all the many decisions that are needed today. We should not undermine the necessity of giving clear ethical guidance to our members in the midst of moral confusion all over the world.

Endnotes

- 1 The EOTC is the Coptic Church which was administered by the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria until the nineteenth century. The *Ge'ez* word *Tawabedo* means “unified,” which refers to the EOTC’s belief that the divine and human natures of Jesus are unified into one nature. Contrary to the Chalcedonian Creed, which confesses the two natures of Christ, the EOTC strongly teaches about the *unified* nature of Christ. See Alemayehu Desta, *Introduction to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tawabedo Faith* (Bloomington, IN: Author House, 2012). The EECMY is the Lutheran church body established in 1959 by the five western evangelical Lutheran missions (Sweden Evangelical Mission (SEM), German Hermannsburg Mission (GHM), Norwegian Lutheran Mission (NLM), Danish Evangelical Mission (DEM), American Lutheran Mission (ALM). Later the American Presbyterian Church joined the five mission societies’ group). See also Gustave Aren, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia: Origins of the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus* (Addis Ababa: The Evangelical Church of Mekane Yesus, 1978), 105–126.
- 2 *Ya Iyyopya Ortodoks Tawabedo Bitakerestiyen: Emnat Serwata Amlehokema Yawec Genesumat: The Ethiopian Orthodox Tawabedo Church Faith, Order of Worship and Ecumenical Relations* (Addis Ababa: Tensa’è Masatamiya Dereget, 1996), 68–70. For instance, the examples of Abraham and Rahab are seen as a proof of an emphasis on good works being equally as important as faith for salvation and righteousness (Jas 2:14–26).
- 3 *Ya Iyyopya Ortodoks Tawabedo*, 69.
- 4 Marcos Daoud, *The Liturgy of the Ethiopian Church* (Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam Printing Press of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, 1954), 10.
- 5 *Ya Iyyopya Ortodoks*, 69.

- 6 Abera Bekele, ትምህርት ሃይማኖትና ክርስትናዊ ሕይወት (Doctrines and Christian Life). (Addis Ababa: Mahbere Qidusan, 2004 [*Ethiopian calendar for 1996*]), 319. See also Berhanu Gobena, መሪ-ሃ ቋጠኝት (A Guide to Salvation). (Addis Ababa: Berana, 1998 [*Ethiopian calendar for 1990*]), 128.
- 7 The EOTC has preserved the *Anaphoras* (the church's liturgical texts) that strongly teach about the sacraments, specifically about the Eucharist since the fifth century. See Emmanuel Fritsch, *Encyclopaedia Aethiopicæ: "Qaddasë"*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig, Vol. 4, *O-X* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010), 271. The seven Sacraments of the EOTC are baptism, Holy Communion, penance, unction of the sick, confirmation, holy orders, and matrimony.
- 8 Robert Kolb, "Luther on the Theology of the Cross" (*Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. XVI, 2002), 443.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 445.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 447-448.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 458.
- 12 *Luther's Works, Lecture on Galatians 1535 Chapter 1-4*, Vol. 26 (ed.) Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 155-164. Cf. Gal. 2:19.
- 13 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 63.
- 14 *Luther's Works, Lecture on Galatians 1535 Chapter 1-4*. Vol. 26 (ed.) Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 155-164. Cf. Gal. 3:13.
- 15 Ingolf U. Dalferth, "Faith, Systematic Theology" In *The Encyclopedia of Christianity v.2* (eds.) Erwin Fahlbusch (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 267.
- 16 For example, see Article XX of the Augsburg Confession in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 52-57.
- 17 Robert Kolb, "Luther on the Two Kinds of Righteousness; Reflections on His Two-Dimensional Definition of Humanity at the Heart of His Theology" (1999), 452-453.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 453.
- 19 Kolb, "Theology of the Cross," 447.
- 20 Kolb, "Two Kinds of Righteousness," 449.