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The Christian Answer to the Ethical Problem

A Study of Catechism Question Number 170

By DALE E. GRIFFIN

EDITORIAL NOTE: This essay was delivered as a conference paper to the Philadelphia Regional Conference of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod.

THE Reformation doctrine of justification by faith without the deeds of the Law has been frequently questioned and declared to be injurious to the moral and ethical lives of the children of God. The Roman Catholic historian Philip Hughes says:

More important . . . is the teaching of the third and shortest of these tracts, *The Liberty of the Christian Man*. . . . Although the just man would do good works—as a good tree brings forth good fruit—there was not, and there could not be, any obligation on the justified believer to do good works.¹

Hartmann Grisar examines Luther's doctrine of good works on the basis of Luther's *Sermon on Good Works* and *The Liberty of the Christian Man* and comes to the following conclusion:

The fundamental deficiency of his theory of good works cannot escape the critical eye.

In the first place, he says, good works are only such as have been commanded by God. Such a thing as the voluntary assumption of a moral act that is not commanded by God does not exist for him. Consequently, the main artery of the perfect life is severed. There is no foundation for the intense pursuit of virtue or for heroism. The saints of the Bible or of Church history, whose wondrous deeds were not inspired by divine command, were simply fools.

Hence, according to Luther, good works flow spontaneously from confident faith in the blood of Christ. But neither his own life nor that of others confirms this doctrine.²

¹ *A History of the Church* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1947), III, 517f.

² *Martin Luther, His Life and Work* (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1935), p. 144.

Similar statements, not always made with scholarly restraint, have appeared frequently and may indeed have a basis in the lives and thinking of many children of the Reformation. A paper on the ethical implications of the Pauline and Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith without the deeds of the Law is therefore very much in place.

The assigned text for this study is Catechism Question No. 170:

What is a good work in the sight of God?

In the sight of God a good work is everything that a child of God *does, speaks, or thinks in faith* according to the *Ten Commandments*, for the *glory of God*, for the *benefit of his neighbor*.³

A quotation from a child's manual of religion would hardly seem to be an adequate source of study for a conference of theologians. Yet these simple words present issues of such depth and breadth as would require books to treat them adequately. In a brief sentence this catechetical quotation gives the Christian answer to the ethical problem. It involves the complexity of man's nature, the psychological motivations of his behavior, the problem of his relationship to God, the purpose of man, yes, all of man's being and life. A brief conference paper cannot possibly explore adequately all of the facets pertaining to these problems.

I

The first phrase of our catechetical answer to the ethical question is, "In the sight of God." We are reminded immediately that the understanding of the concept "good works" varies with the individual and that those actions which may be accounted good by man may not be good in God's sight. This truth is recognized by our Lutheran Confessions. The Apology (II 12) states:

But after the scholastics mingled with Christian doctrine philosophy concerning the perfection of nature, and ascribed to the free will and the acts springing therefrom more than was sufficient, and taught that men are justified before God by philosophic or civil righteousness (which we also confess to be subject to reason, and, in a measure, within our power), they could not see the inner uncleanness of the nature of men.⁴

³ *A Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism*, A Handbook of Christian Doctrine (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1943), p. 129.

⁴ *Triglot Concordia* (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 109.

Francis Pieper, in his *Christian Dogmatics*, writes:

By good works of the heathen and unbelievers in general such works are meant as comply externally (*in materia*) with the norm of the divine Law still written in the heart of fallen man (Rom. 2:15 f.; 1:32). That such works are being done is stated in Rom. 2:14: "The Gentiles do by nature the things contained in the Law." Also Luther sets forth that in their external form such works as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, succoring the distressed, laboring diligently in one's profession and trade, etc., are much like the works of Christians, yea, surpass them in the sight of men.

Pieper then quotes Dr. Martin Luther, who referred to Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, and Scipio, as men who

have performed greater feats than ever any Christian; such prowess in war, such endurance and fortitude in all kinds of adversity and hardship you will not easily discover in any king in Christendom nor among the kings in Israel, such as David and the others.⁵

God recognizes and rewards these good works of civil righteousness with good health, peace, economic prosperity, and the like.

The Apology (II 24) states concerning such works:

Now . . . we cheerfully assign this righteousness of reason the praises that are due it (for this corrupt nature has no greater good [in this life and in a worldly nature, nothing is ever better than uprightness and virtue], and Aristotle says aright: *Neither the evening star nor the morning star is more beautiful than righteousness*, and God also honors it with bodily rewards), yet it ought not to be praised with reproach to Christ.⁶

While the good works of the unbeliever must be recognized and valued, yet these works are not sufficient to make man acceptable in the sight of God. In His sight "we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags" (Is. 64:6). James wrote, "Whosoever shall keep the whole Law and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all" (James 2:10). Jesus demanded nothing less than absolute perfection: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5:48).

For many years such thought trends as the Enlightenment,

⁵ *Christian Dogmatics*, trans. Walter W. F. Albrecht (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950-57), III, 43 f.

⁶ *Trilog Concordia* p. 127.

Deism, Rationalism, Naturalism, Evolution, and Modernism influenced people to discount the Biblical teaching of original sin. However, today the validity of this Biblical doctrine is recognized in existential philosophy and in psychology. Although we must base our faith on the revealed teachings of God in the Bible, yet we are very much interested in noting the dim view of man which is becoming increasingly more general.

We cannot explore thoroughly this revised opinion of the nature of man, but it will be profitable to adduce several examples. Sigmund Freud (1856—1939), who has influenced greatly modern man's view of himself, taught that the human personality has three components—the id, the ego, and the superego. The "id" is the true unconscious of man and is dominated by the pleasure principle. Thus the true unconscious of man is self-seeking, selfish, and self-centered. However, the "ego," which is the center of man's conscious self, is in communication with the realities of man's environment and modifies the impulses of the id in such a way that man's behavior will be socially acceptable. The "superego" is the inner monitor, or conscience, which criticizes both the ego and the id. The point that we wish to make is that Freud's psychology recognizes the self-seeking inner nature of man. Indeed, he took such a dim view of man's nature that Carl G. Jung (1875—) was led to criticize his position with the rather harsh judgment:

... this is in fact the menace which Freudian psychology appears to offer. It points no way that leads beyond the inexorable cycle of biological events. This hopelessness would drive one to exclaim with Paul: "Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from the body of this death?"⁷

Another example that modern man recognizes the fact that externally good works are not necessarily good is the study of the Menningers at the Topeka Foundation. In *Man Against Himself* Dr. Karl Menninger points out how many apparently good works as asceticism, martyrdom, self-sacrifice, and generosity at the expense of one's family may be subtle forms of suicide or murder. To illustrate Dr. Menninger's thinking we quote his appraisal of Simeon Stylites:

⁷ *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (Harvest Book; New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1933), p. 121.

The story of the famous Simeon Stylites is even more revealing in his aggressive attitude toward his mother. Of him Lecky has this to say: "He had been passionately loved by his parents, and if we may believe his eulogist and biographer, he began his saintly career by breaking the heart of his father, who died of grief at his flight. His mother, however, lingered on. Twenty-seven years after his disappearance, at a period when his austerities had made him famous, she heard for the first time where he was, and hastened to visit him. But all her labor was in vain. No woman was admitted within the precincts of his dwelling, and he refused to permit her even to look upon his face. Her entreaties and tears were mingled with words of bitter and eloquent reproach. 'My son,' she is represented as having said, 'why have you done this? I bore you in my womb, and you have wrung my soul with grief. I gave you milk from my breast, you have filled my eyes with tears. For the kisses I gave you, you have given me the anguish of a broken heart; for all that I have done or suffered for you, you have repaid me by the most cruel wrongs.' At last the saint sent a message to tell her that she would soon see him. Three days and three nights she had wept and entreated in vain, and now, exhausted with grief and age and privation, she sank feebly to the ground and breathed her last sigh before that inhospitable door. Then for the first time the saint, accompanied by his followers, came out. He shed some pious tears over the corpse of his murdered mother, and offered up a prayer consigning her soul to heaven . . . and then, amid the admiring murmurs of his disciples, the saintly matricide returned to his devotions."⁸

Man is incapable of doing good works because he himself is not good. Aristotle is quoted by Thilly as having taught, "Moral conduct implies a disposition (*ἔξῃς*) or a habit of the will; it is an expression of character: one swallow does not make a spring."⁹ Jesus makes this very clear:

Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good

⁸ Karl Menninger, *Man Against Himself* (Harvest Book; New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1938), pp. 113f. His quotation is from W. E. H. Lecky, *History of European Morals* (Appleton, 1884), II, 134.

⁹ Frank Thilly, *A History of Philosophy* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1914), p. 90.

tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. (Matt. 7:16-18)

He also taught:

Either make the tree good and his fruit good, or else make the tree corrupt and his fruit corrupt, for the tree is known by his fruit. . . . A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things. (Matt. 12:33,35)

Dr. Karl Menninger agrees: "Psychoanalysis agrees with religion that as a man thinketh in his heart so is he, and that guilt attaches almost as much to aggressive wishes as to aggressive acts."¹⁰

In the first chapters of Genesis we are given to understand why man is not a "good tree." Created by God, man was perfect. However, he was not an autonomous being but, as a derivative of God, totally dependent on Him for all that he is and for all that he has. Man was to serve his Creator in conformity with His designs and purposes. Therefore God, not the self, is to be the center of man's life.

The creation narrative delineates clearly and specifically just what man's purposes in life are. First, man is the instrument through whom God continues to create new human life. Through procreation man exercises his dignity of being a cocreator with God. Therefore we read: "And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth." (Gen. 1:28)

Second, God endowed man with the ability and the responsibility to discover and to utilize for good the vast resources of His creation. Describing this privilege and obligation, the creation account says:

And God blessed them, and God said unto them . . . replenish the earth, and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. (Gen. 1:28)

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. (Gen. 1:26)

¹⁰ *Love Against Hate* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1942), p. 193.

And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them. And whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof. And Adam gave names to all cattle and to the fowl of the air and to every beast of the field. (Gen. 2:19,20)

Third, when God chartered man to use his mind in discovering the mysteries of his new world, He also intended that man should employ his physical strength in this work of subjection and dominion. God placed Adam in the Garden of Eden "to dress it and to keep it" (Gen. 2:15). The curse of sin was not manual labor, as some have indicated, but it was the irksome toil, the disappointments, and the frustrations of such labor which were the results of the Fall. (Gen. 3:17-19)

Fourth, man was not to labor and to serve God in isolation but in community with his fellows (Gen. 2:18). Man was to serve God by using his talents to serve his fellow men. He was not to exploit others through his labors and talents but to help them.

This was the life of man as God intended it to be. But man fell into sin and thus chose for himself a way apart from God. Through the Fall, man underwent a complete and radical change. No longer content to be the servant of God, he sought, and still seeks, to be the god of his own little world and to trust in the resources of that world for his happiness and well-being.

Dr. James A. Pike presents the following analysis of fallen man:

It is important to note the character of the temptation: *Ye shall be as gods*. This is the temptation for autonomy apart from God, the temptation to set up one's self and one's affairs and earthly arrangements as final categories of meaning and devotion. The mysterious figure of the serpent suggests that even from the beginning sin presupposes itself and that already things had gone awry in the universe before man came along.¹¹ Eve, and through her influence, Adam, makes a declaration of independence from God, and the problem of good and evil is brought to their consciousness.

The first decision they make is for evil. This is the usual result of self-centeredness. Now Adam's relationships change in three ways. He is separated from God (he hides from God; he doesn't

¹¹ This obviously is a reference to the fall of the angels.

want to "talk about religion," as has been the case of so many since who have not kept God's will). He is also separated by sin from his neighbor: he seeks to place the blame on Eve. ("The woman whom Thou gavest to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I did eat.") And he is separated from his true self as made in the image of God. The guilt feelings are symbolized by the fig leaves: they are telling signs of his spiritual disease.

Now the peaceful garden scene is disrupted: travail has replaced peace. Cain and Abel are born into a disordered world. . . . They cultivate the soil and tend flocks, but self-centeredness expresses itself in Cain's slaying of Abel: pride in the first generation, murder in the second. The two sides of the split continue.

Men develop industry, arts, and crafts (Jabal, Jubal, and Tubalcain). But evil grows apace too. ("And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.") The outcome of human evil in man's assertion of autonomy is dramatically illustrated by the story of the Tower of Babel. Men seek to build a tower to heaven, but there is no way of maintaining a corporate autonomy as against God. Each individual autonomy asserts itself against the others, and men find that they can no longer speak each other's languages. Babel becomes babble. The project fails.¹²

Although the late William Temple (1881—1944), onetime Archbishop of Canterbury, may not have accepted the doctrine of original sin in its orthodox form, he described its effects very graphically:

. . . Quite enough for our present purpose [the doctrine of original sin] may be expressed as follows. When we open our eyes as babies we see the world stretching out around us; we are in the middle of it; all proportions and perspectives in what we see are determined by the relation—distance, height, and so forth—of the various visible objects to ourselves. This will remain true of our bodily vision as long as we live. I am the centre of the world I see; where the horizon is depends on where I stand. Now just the same thing is true at first of our mental and spiritual vision. Some things hurt us; we hope they will not happen again; we call them bad. Some things please us; we hope they will happen

¹² James A. Pike, *Doing the Truth*, 1955, pp. 69 f. (Permission to quote granted by Doubleday & Co., Garden City, N. Y.)

again; we call them good. Our standard of value is the way things affect ourselves. So each of us takes his place in the centre of his own world. But I am not the centre of the world, or the standard of reference as between good and bad; I am not, and God is. In other words, from the beginning I put myself in God's place. This is my original sin.¹³

This is the human predicament. Man is completely off-base. He has placed himself and his environment as it affects him, in the center of his world, thus displacing God. Luther, in describing this situation, used such terms as *curvus*, *curvus in se*, and *incurvatus in se*. Man no longer directs his life vertically to God and horizontally to his fellow men. (Matt. 22:37-39)

Anders Nygren, in his *Agape and Eros*, adduces these pertinent quotations from Luther:

A *crooked* spirit is the spirit of the flesh and of Adam, which in all things is *bent upon itself* and seeks its own; which is inborn in us.

The heart that is right towards God and *not bent upon itself* or anything other than God, is well grounded upon the eternal, and stands firm. . . . But the *crooked souls, bent upon themselves* with false opinion and deceptive good ideas, pride themselves upon themselves and not in God.

. . . everything is *crooked {incurvata}*; I seek in God and in all creatures what pleases myself.¹⁴

Luther's figure of speech is Scriptural: "That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked (*σκολιᾶς*) and perverse (*δυστροπιδένης*) nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world." (Phil. 2:15; cf. Matt. 17:7; Luke 9:41; Acts 2:40)

Because man is self-centered and because man's interest points inward rather than upward to God and outward to his neighbor, man's conception of his purposes in life, as enumerated above, has also become depraved.

¹³ *Christianity and the Social Order* (Pelican Book; London: Hunt, Barnard & Co., Ltd., 1956 [1st ed., 1942]), p. 52.

¹⁴ Weimar Ed. 18, p. 504 and 491; 40, 2, pp. 325, 10f. Quoted in Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip Watson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), p. 713n.

We are aware how shamefully man has perverted the power of procreation, through which he was to be a cocreator with God. The sexual endowment is so glaringly used for sinful self-gratification that no proof of its prevalence need be adduced.

Men have also gone to the opposite extreme and regarded the sexual act as ignoble and even bad. Medieval theology exalted virginity to such an extent that sex was considered carnal and sinful. Protestant Puritanism and Pietism likewise subscribed to this low estimate of sex. Many marriages degenerate because one partner, or both, regards sex as filthy and develops a neurotic sense of guilt and degradation.

James A. Pike has some telling observations to make concerning the perversion of the God-given power of procreation:

In our culture we have generally taught young people that sexual intercourse is wrong and the use of it within marriage is to be regarded as a sort of exception, like a special license to park one's car illegally. Actually we should not have been saying that sex is a bad thing; we should have been stressing that sex is a good thing, that it is a sacrament, and therefore should not be used sacrilegiously. When the outward and visible sign is entered into without the inward and spiritual commitment, then this, as in the case of the other sacraments, is the very meaning of sacrilege. Sex apart from marriage is wrong, not because sex is bad, but because it is so good.¹⁵

The second purpose of man has also been perverted by sinful man. In its proper function science is the means of discovering and using God's blessings which He has placed in the universe. Self-directed man has for self-glorification misused his intellect and his quest of discovery. Science has so often been used to enthrone man in the place of God rather than to acknowledge the wonderful gifts of the Creator.

Likewise the labor of man's hands lost its dignity. Ancient philosophers regarded physical work as degrading and unworthy of man. Those who performed physical tasks, the women and slaves, were given a very low status, and it was seriously questioned whether they possessed souls. The thinkers reasoned that man's distinction

¹⁵ Pike, p. 155. Marriage is not a sacrament in the sense in which this term is used in the Lutheran Church.

from brute animals was his possession of a mind ($\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$); therefore man's proper employment was in the use of this distinctive endowment. He was to labor in the realm of ideas; his highest destiny was eventual absorption into the Universal Mind or Soul. This concept is found in certain Oriental religions. Medieval theologians believed that there was no physical labor before the Fall and that manual work is a part of sin and its consequences. Therefore, they reasoned, God is served better through a life of contemplation than one of labor.¹⁶

But all labor, whether intellectual or physical, was intended to be a means of serving God and man. Man has also lost sight of this purpose. His aims are "curved inward." He evaluates his work, his time, and the investment of his money according to the selfish standard: What's in it for me?

All of this, and more, is man's predicament. Estranged from God and blind to the purposes of his Creator, man's works are not acceptable until he is reunited with God. Then alone the dynamic for right ethical conduct is provided.

II

This raises the question: How is man reunited with God? The answer to this question is vital in solving the ethical problem. Therefore our Catechism states: "A good work in the sight of God is everything that a *child of God* does, speaks, or thinks in faith."

Nygren aptly writes:

Religion is fellowship with the eternal, with God. The question of questions for any religion, therefore, is: How is fellowship with God conceived; how is it supposed to be realized, in what does it consist? The answer to this question reveals the fundamental motif of the religion under discussion. For if the essence of religion is fellowship with God, then the ultimately determinative factor of any actual, historical religion must be the way in which it conceives of fellowship with God. Now the answers given to this question by Hellenism, by Judaism (which are typical of all religions other than Christianity) and by Christianity are conceived respectively in terms of *Eros*, of *Nomos*, and of *Agape*.

¹⁶ Cf. Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1947), pp. 655 f.

Man's desire for heavenly things, man's fulfilling of the Law, and God's own love freely bestowed on the sinner — these are three different ways to fellowship with God.¹⁷

Throughout the ages people have tried to solve the ethical problem by urging men to love the wise, the beautiful, the good. This love is an emotional reaction, produced by and dependent on the loveliness of the object of ἔρως. Christianity, too, is defined by some as a reaching up to God by having love and good will for God and for mankind. But this love or a "right sentiment," generated by natural, fallen man, is not acceptable to God, because the right relationship to God is lacking.

The second answer proposed for the religious question is that of the Law, the νόμος motif. The grace of God as revealed to the Patriarchs, to Moses, and to the prophets, was perverted into a religion that satisfies God by works of the Law. It is important to note that the Israelites were the chosen people of God before the giving of the Ten Commandments and the ceremonial and political laws. At Mount Sinai, God said in effect: "You have been chosen by Me to be My people. Now here is the standard by which you are to live as such." God did not choose this people because they kept His Law; rather He gave them this Law because He had chosen them as His people. First they were His people; then, because of what they were by God's grace, they were to keep the Law.

Judaism perverted the revelation of God's grace by teaching that compliance with the Law is the cause rather than the result of being God's children. The Christian Gospel has also been so perverted. The Gospel proclaims that we have been accepted as the children of God through the life and merits of Jesus Christ. As a result we now seek to live the new life of new beings in Christ. But this Gospel has been perverted to say that by seeking to follow Christ as the new Lawgiver we are the children of God. Thus the Gospel is no longer the proclamation of God's grace in His Son but a new code of laws.

But the truth is that man is incapable of reaching out to God either by right sentiments of ἔρως or by outward conformity with

¹⁷ Nygren, pp. x, xi.

the Law. Whatever man does of himself stands under the condemnation of God.

The only valid answer to the question of fellowship with God can be summarized by one word, ἀγάπη. This love of God regardless of the worth of the recipient is the golden theme of the entire revelation of God. It is the motif of the Old Testament just as much as of the New.

Hosea for example presents this motif in a striking way. He was used by God as an object lesson in portraying His relationship with man. Hosea loved his adulterous wife in spite of her repeated infidelities and the indignities which she inflicted on him.

God still loves His people in spite of their unfaithfulness to Him. God accepts man, who is wholly unacceptable. This is divine grace. It comes to man in Jesus Christ. He is our Righteousness; He loved perfectly for us who cannot really love. In Him God's justice was satisfied. Man can do nothing to merit the righteousness, love, life, and peace of Christ. All are free gifts, accepted in faith — and even faith is a free gift of God. Through faith in Christ man is a new creature, the temple of the Holy Spirit, a child of God. Then, and only then, can man do anything good. It is Christ, dwelling in man, who gives him the power and the ability to do what is well-pleasing in God's sight.

St. Paul makes this clear when he says:

Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ that we might be justified by the faith of Christ and not by the works of the Law, for by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified. . . . I am crucified with Christ. Nevertheless I live; yet not I but Christ liveth in me. And the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. I do not frustrate the grace of God (Gal. 2:16, 20-21 a). The love of Christ constraineth us. (2 Cor. 5:14)

Therefore the Catechism is correct in declaring that only a child of God is able to do that which is good in the sight of God.

This truth needs constant stress in a practical way. We do not help our people perform good works by the use of such devices as flattery, pressure, censure, and the like. Works thus produced are not motivated by the love of Christ but by such self-centered

motivations as the desire to please, the wish to be liked and accepted, or the need to satisfy and to quiet the urging of an aroused conscience.

Nor are we to use the Law in order to stimulate good works. The Law serves as a guide to show us just what truly good works are. But the motivation and stimulation for such works can come only through the faithful proclamation of the Gospel. This truth was stated in a masterful way by C. F. W. Walther many years ago:

But it requires labor on the part of the minister till these persons are reborn *by the Word of God*. If he is unwilling to perform this labor, he neglects the souls of such persons. — Or take the case of tardy communicants who will come to the Sacrament once again after the minister has reproved them. If he is satisfied with that, he is guilty of commingling Law and Gospel. Or take the sin of avarice. A congregation may be so stingy as to refuse to take up a collection; it may fail to pay the pastor his salary. In that case the pastor must not resolve to preach his people a sharp sermon in order to open their purses. Opening purses by means of the Law is no achievement at all. He must preach in a manner that will rouse them out of their spiritual sleep and death. If he does not do that, he falls under the censure of our sixteenth thesis.¹⁸

Let no minister think that he cannot induce the unwilling to do God's will by preaching the Gospel to them and that he must rather preach the Law and proclaim the threatenings of God to them. If that is all he can do he will only lead his people to perdition. Rather than act the policeman in his congregation, he ought to change the hearts of his members in order that they may without restraint do what is pleasing to God with a glad and cheerful heart. A person who has a real understanding of the love of God in Christ Jesus is astonished at its fire, which is able to melt anything in heaven and on earth. The moment he believes in this love he cannot but love God and from gratitude for his salvation do anything from love of God and for His glory. It is a useless effort to try to soften with laws and threatenings such hearts as are not melted by having the love of God in Christ Jesus presented to them. The best preachers are those who in this respect do as Luther did, such as preach the Law only accomplish

¹⁸ C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, trans. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1929), p. 303.

nothing. In such measure as you exhibit the Law in its spiritual meaning, in that measure you sink your hearers into despair, but do not make them willing to serve God.¹⁰

III

The Christian is a child of God in Christ Jesus. This means not only that a part of the Christian's life and being belongs to God but that his all is God's. Therefore our Catechism answer to the ethical problem continues:

"Everything that a child of God does, speaks, or thinks."

The entire person is the instrument of the Spirit of God, thoroughly dedicated to good works. Often we think of good works as isolated or outward actions. But our whole being is to be good.

Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount emphasizes the totality of dedication of self to God. The people to whom He addressed Himself—specifically the Pharisees—viewed good works as isolated, external actions. Jesus wished to emphasize totality of dedication. Here are two examples:

Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart. (Matt. 5:27, 28)

Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect. (Matt. 5:48)

Here a word of warning is in place. Occasionally people reason that inasmuch as the thought itself is as much an evil as the actual deed, they might just as well realize in action their evil thoughts and desires. The point our Savior makes is that we should seek to discipline, with the aid of the Spirit of God, our will and mind as well as our external actions.

Medical science also has learned to regard man as a whole being. Physicians know that often not only emotional and mental disorders but also many physical ailments are produced by wrong attitudes and thinking. If man is to live a truly healthful life, the total self must be rightly oriented. In his textbook for physicians, *Practice of Psychiatry*, Dr. William S. Sadler underscores the fact that just as the perversion of Christianity into a religion of legalism

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 389.

and fear is extremely detrimental to the emotional well-being of a person, the positive proclamation and application of the religion of Jesus Christ, rightly understood, is a powerful and effective therapeutic aid.²⁰ The whole man must be properly oriented physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually for maximum happiness and well-being.

The significance of proper total orientation is illustrated by the psychological term *fixation*. In part, this includes the fact that we are influenced by the impressions which have been inscribed on our conscious and unconscious minds. Thus there is a relationship between the reading of horror comics, emphasizing violence and lust, and juvenile delinquency. Stimuli of all sorts—lust for power, greed for money, inordinate desire for social prominence, overemphasis on certain recreational possibilities—influence greatly the individual's thought pattern and, through the mind, his actual life design.

Therefore the child of God must be reminded that not only his life of action be sanctified but also his mind and his emotions. The trouble with daydreaming is that we usually are not thinking about those things which will truly improve what we are. The things with which we occupy our minds usually determine how we use our time and natural endowments and how we express our vocation in life. The more we nourish our minds and hearts with good things, the more we will want to do what is right. St. Paul was well aware of this function of the mind when he wrote:

Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things. (Phil. 4:8)

It is within this frame of reference that we may discuss such ancient disciplinary measures as fasting, set hours of prayer, and the like. Because of the abuses associated with them we have taken a dim view of such practices. What were their purpose? Fastings and similar practices were intended to discipline the minds of the people, turning their thoughts in meditation to God and His will. A mechanical observance of such practices as a means of salvation

²⁰ (St. Louis: Mosby, 1953), pp. 1000 ff.

must be rejected; but they may be an aid in achieving a God-pleasing purpose. Sanctification of the life of the child of God includes the proper discipline of the mind for holy things.

Again there is a tendency on the part of some to emphasize the negative aspects of religion. If you ask some people just what it is that makes a person a good member of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, they may answer, "A faithful member is one who is opposed to such things as lodgery and dancing." By emphasizing the negative features of religion people may be led to regard Christianity as a religion of hedges which prevent him from enjoying life. They miss the positive values of Christianity, the "joy of salvation," which gives them a peace and happiness which nothing of this world of evil can give.

Martin Luther knew this. In his exposition of each of the Ten Commandments he does not only point out the negative aspects, but he emphasizes the positive implications of each commandment. Here we have "positive thinking" in its best sense.

As undershepherds of the flock of the Good Shepherd, we pastors have tremendous obligations for leading our people into fruitful lives of good works. Often we try to discharge this duty merely by setting up rules and regulations which we expect our people to follow in an external way. If our people give so much for the home congregation and Synod, if they attend church and the Holy Communion so many times within a year's span, if they fulfill other expectations which we have established, then we may believe that we have accomplished our purpose. But our office is much more difficult than that! We must feed them the Word of life so that they, filled with the grace and power of God, will *want* to do what is pleasing to God, not from coercion but from willing hearts and minds. We must seek to affect more than outward lives and modify them by such gimmicks as rules; we must bring the power of the Gospel into the very innermost lives and minds of our people.

The whole person and the whole life of the child of God is involved in sanctification. For some this implies leaving worldly jobs and professions and devoting all of one's time, treasures, and talents to work in the church. Possibly we have given our people the idea that it is only through such a ministry in the church that

one can serve God. At the time of the Reformation this view was prevalent. Therefore Martin Luther emphasized again and again the Biblical doctrine of the Christian vocation. He pointed out that the child of God can serve God as a citizen, a farmer, a maid, or a mother, as well as a monk or a nun. He said:

. . . If you call in reason as judge, the works of a servant, a maid, an employer, a mistress, a mayor, and a judge are common, lowly works compared with this that a Carthusian monk watches, fasts, prays, eats no meat; but if God's Word is called in as judge, the works of all Carthusian and other monks, though one would melt and pour them all into one heap, are not as good as the work of a single poor maid who by Baptism has been translated into the kingdom of God, believes in Christ, and in faith is looking for the blessed hope. . . . Therefore, since we have heard what is our blessed hope for which we should look, we should now also learn what works are good, namely, what is done in faith in our appointed calling according to God's command and Word.²¹

The Christian life includes all of life. The child of God is to function in various orders within society. Convenient categories of such orders, as established by Emil Brunner, include the communities of marriage and the family, of labor, of people and the law, of culture (i. e., science, art, education, friendships), and of faith.²²

The church today is not to monopolize the time, the abilities, and the money of our people. Assuredly the "community of faith" is important, and it requires the best our people can give and do. But the child of God is to let his light shine in all areas of human endeavor. Therefore the church is to aid man in discovering the true stewardship of life, to budget well his time, treasures, and talents for Christian life in all proper areas. Christian influences are necessary in government, art, science, law, and other human endeavors. The church must recognize the Christian's obligation to be the salt of the earth.

At this point several practical questions suggest themselves. 1. Does the modern church have such a complex organizational life that the faithful supporters of the church's program are unable to

²¹ Quoted in Pieper, III, 27, 28.

²² Cf. Brunner, pp. 655, 656.

be a salt in society? 2. Are we pastors frittering away so much of our time on trivialities incidental to this organizational life that we no longer have time to grow in the knowledge and the grace of Jesus Christ, to feed the flock through personal visitations, to set an example to the congregation and the community in wholesome, happy family life? 3. Do we permit the work of the church to become the burden of a few, who eventually become discouraged because too much is required, or do we lead all of our people to do at least something for the church so that all have time also for other activities and interests?

IV

The catechetical answer continues to define a truly good work as one that is done "in faith."

The Sunday morning offering plate may contain a check for \$1,000. In the sight of the finance committee this appears to be a very good work, but is it necessarily so in the sight of God?

This depends on the motivation behind the gift. Possibly the personal life of the donor is not what it should be, and he is seeking to appease his conscience by making amends for ill-gotten gains. Or he anticipates the expression of gratitude on the part of his fellow members. Perhaps he believes that this substantial gift will assure him a place in heaven. He may have been pressured into making this generous offering. He may be a very wealthy man, and this gift represents only a small part of what he should be giving. Perhaps he has taken a liking to the pastor and is doing this to please him. None of these motivations make this gift acceptable to God.

There is only one acceptable motivation for a good work, and that is love. Jesus therefore said: "Thou shalt love the Lord, thy God, with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind. . . . Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Matt. 22: 37, 38). This love is not a natural disposition of man, but it is the free gift of God through faith.

St. Paul's great "hymn of love" (1 Cor. 13) speaks of this love. This chapter has often been misused to point out that man should cultivate a generous and loving spirit. Men have appealed to it to bolster their contention that it is not important what an individual

believes; what matters is that his heart is in the right place, that he is kind and good, and that he pursues that which is fine, beautiful, and wise. It has been quoted to support the social gospel and refined forms of socialism.

But Paul does not refer to love as *ἔρως*, a disposition on the part of man, which really is egocentric and flows from self-love. He is speaking of *ἀγάπη*, of the love produced by the Christian Gospel. It is not something that natural man can engender and develop; it is a free gift of God's grace, bestowed upon man through faith in Christ Jesus. Every deed motivated by this love is acceptable in God's sight.²³

During the Middle Ages the church had reverted to a definition of love which was more compatible with the *ἔρως* of Hellenistic philosophy than with the *ἀγάπη* of the Gospel. For the sake of clarity, therefore, Martin Luther preferred the term "faith" as the source of good works. Thus he sought to preserve the divine origin and character of the love which exists in the child of God and which motivates him to live in accordance with the will of God.²⁴ The compilers of our synodical Catechism, in giving the Christian answer to the ethical question, follow Luther in stating that faith, which appropriates the gracious love of God in Christ, is the motivation of the Christian life.

As has been suggested above, this has serious implications for the minister of the Word. It is the task of the pastor to bring the motivating power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ into the lives of his people. Yet we often resort to purely psychological or legalistic devices. We "clobber" our people to do good; we "ride" our people; we tell our people they must do this or that because it is their "duty" or because God has "commanded them" to do so; "if you don't do this, you aren't a Christian!"

Perhaps we use a more subtle approach. We praise our people for their good deeds, and this is commendable. But we need to be aware of the danger of complimenting them merely as an appeal to their ego to do still better.

It cannot be emphasized enough that there is but one way by

²³ Nygren, pp. 133—144.

²⁴ For an excellent discussion of Luther's theocentric views of love see Nygren, pp. 681—741.

which we can lead our people to want to do works which are pleasing to God: proclaim faithfully the Gospel of Jesus Christ, through which the Spirit of God bestows, strengthens, and nourishes the faith of His children, giving them the love of God in Christ, which will move them to shun evil and to follow after that which is good. Only then can we proceed to inform our people of the various ways in which they can express the love and faith which God has given them.

V

Antinomians have argued that inasmuch as children of God are motivated to do good works through the proclamation of the Gospel the Law is quite unnecessary for the Christian man and is intended only for unregenerate man. This view is contrary to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. Therefore our Catechism continues: ". . . in accordance with the Ten Commandments."

First, the standard of the Law is significant for the child of God because, although truly converted, he still has his old Adam and therefore needs the Law. The Epitome of the Formula of Concord (IV) states:

2. We believe, teach, and confess that the preaching of the Law is to be urged with diligence, not only upon the unbelieving and impenitent, but also upon true believers, who are truly converted, regenerate, and justified by faith.

3. For although they are regenerate and renewed in the spirit of their mind, yet in the present life this regeneration and renewal is not complete, but only begun, and believers are, by the spirit of their mind, in a constant struggle against the flesh, that is, against the corrupt nature and disposition which cleaves to us unto death. On account of this old Adam, . . . it is needful that the Law of the Lord always shine before them, in order that they may not from human devotion institute wanton and self-elected cults.²⁵

Because his baser nature still clings to the regenerate child of God, he finds the Law useful also in determining just what are the good works with which he is to serve God. He needs this objective standard; the norms established by men are incomplete,

²⁵ *Triglot Concordia* pp. 805—807.

deceptive, and misleading. The rules devised by men for communal living are valid only insofar as they are in conformity with the divine will. They may also sanction what God forbids. The political and social laws of Moses were designed only for the people of the Old Covenant and are no longer normative for the believer under the New Covenant. Special commands given to individuals in the Bible are not necessarily valid; no Christian should follow the command of God to Abraham to sacrifice his son. The decrees of the church certainly must be regarded as human interpretations of the Word at best; at their worst they represent devices intended for the advancement of personal or institutional interests. The child of God must ascertain the will of God for him in the Bible.²⁶

The Ten Commandments, however, are regarded differently by the Christian and by unregenerate man. Natural man finds the Law a hindrance to his personal desires and ambitions and therefore distasteful. But the child of God, motivated by God's love to love God and his fellow beings, accepts the Law with gratitude as a sure guide for his life and as a charter of freedom.

Furthermore, the Christian man does not merely follow the letter of the Law, but seeks to interpret the spirit of a commandment. He must make a choice in many situations for which there are no handy ethical "pigeonholes." At times he must engage in a conscientious weighing of factors and decide upon a course of action, which appears to contradict the letter of the Law. Our Lord endorsed the plucking of grain by His disciples on the Sabbath and defended their action by an appeal to the law of love. Such an approach to ethics neither is easy nor does it relax its requirements.

Basically, Christian ethics is not a set of laws, not even a set of noble and lofty norms. It is the response to a personal and total claim to contribute our share in God's great creative, redemptive, and community-building enterprise. Such a view establishes the basis for the right kind of individualism and preserves the dignity of the Christian man. As the free son of God he is the slave of no whim of man, of no earthly authority, of no system. To live responsibly within such freedom is our vocation.²⁷

²⁶ Cf. Pieper, III, 24—26.

²⁷ Pike, pp. 56, 57; 60, 61.

VI

The entire Christian life is worship of God. All that we do is to be "for the glory of God," as our Catechism states it.

This purpose of life is repugnant to natural man, whose aim in life is to serve himself and his own interests. By placing himself in the center of his world, he has displaced God and become an idolater. The farmer of Egypt worshiped the sun, which gave energy to his crops, and the river Nile, which watered his field. Fetishism places divine powers in created things, such as trees or stones. Contemporary America bows down before the graven images of materialism — money, scientific progress, education, armed might — and thus substitutes God's creation for the Creator Himself.

It is only through the regeneration of the Holy Spirit that man can overcome his idolatry and be led to understand that his good does not lie in created things but only in the Creator. Regenerate man sees the material things of the world in their proper perspective as the instruments through which Almighty God creates, preserves, and provides. Therefore the Christian man does not attempt to escape from the material world. He worships the Creator by using created things with thanksgiving and according to the purposes for which they were made. Grateful to the Creator of all good gifts, he sustains his physical life with food and drink, he calls for the services and skills of the physician in his illnesses, he works in order to provide for his and his family's need, he attends school to gain knowledge and understanding. But in everything he glorifies God, who has given him these means for his happiness and well-being.

Moreover, the Christian man worships God by contentment and prays, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." He glorifies God by subordinating his will to the will of his Father in heaven.

VII

The child of God is assured that he serves God when he does things "for the benefit of his neighbor" by ministering to his physical and spiritual needs.

We often say we are "saving men's souls" or "the ministry is important because it works with man's soul." But this may be

misleading. The ministry of Jesus Christ concerned itself with the whole man. He was interested in the body and mind of man as well as the soul. Greek philosophy divided man into these neat compartments, but Hebrew thought as well as the message of Jesus considered man as a whole being which could not be so neatly divided into parts. The summary of the very First Table of the Law indicates that man's relationship with God is not merely that of the soul, but rather man is to be related to God with his "heart," "soul," and "mind." A distorted view of man may have the practical result that we do not always present the whole Gospel.

When a person ministers to the needs of his fellow man, it is a good deed in the sight of God if it is done by a child of God. It is through serving our fellow men that we serve God. However, our relationship to our fellow man must proceed from our relationship to God. It is possible to serve one's fellows and yet not serve God. Therefore in stating His summary of the tables of the Law, Jesus said, "The Second (Table of the Law) is like unto the First" (Matt. 22:39). Our service to our fellow man must be motivated by our love of God.

It is a problem of Christian ethics to determine at all times what specific course to pursue for the welfare of our fellow man. What he thinks he needs may not serve his best interests. To give an intoxicated beggar money he wants to buy more alcohol with is a disservice to him.

On the other hand, we may be tempted not to think of the welfare of our neighbor in terms of what is actually best for him or what God's will for him might be. We all enjoy "playing God." It bolsters our pride to be in the position of taking over the lives of other people and trying to organize them according to our will. Parents often force their children to enter vocations which they choose for them. Mothers like to select the mates for their children. Friends seek to manipulate their friends. Pastors try to decide for their people what is best for them rather than helping them come to their own decisions through an evangelical ministry of the Word.

We must constantly strive to treat and accept people as people, not things. Fascism and Communism regard people as things to be used for the welfare of the state. We may be tempted to regard

our members as things to be used for the interests of organizational Christianity rather than as persons who are to be helped to live in accordance with God's will for them in the church. The emphasis of Scripture on the dignity of the individual forbids us to manipulate, "work," or "use" people. The finest thing we can do for a person is to help him build up his sense of being a person. We can accomplish this in at least three ways.

First, we should seek to inspire our fellow man to recognize the full potential of his endowments. Instead of deprecating his unique gifts, we should rather encourage our neighbor to make good use of them and to develop them to their fullest possibility.

Second, we should accept our fellow man redemptively, though he may be rejected by others and even by himself. Following the example of our Lord, we reject the sin but not the sinner. Rather we should draw him to the love of God in the Christ of the Cross.

Finally, we should draw our fellow man into the community of his fellows, particularly into the community of God's people, so that he can relate his special gifts to the needs of others for mutual enrichment and edification.

This task has a negative and positive aspect. We dare not belittle the efforts of our neighbor; we must refrain from "gossip" which tears down the reputation and self-respect of our fellow man. We must refuse to take unfair advantage of our neighbor's confidence in us for our own selfish aims. On the other hand, we must give attention to the needs of our neighbor's personality, be alert to help him see his opportunities and advance his best interests. This does not mean that we must always compliment and never criticize; frequently our duty requires a candid appraisal. But we must always be aware of our motive in evaluating our neighbor. What we call candor may merely be a ruthless expression of resentment or self-assertiveness, even as our kind words may actually be flattery calculated to advance our own interests.

Serving our fellow men is not always a simple task, furthermore, because our decisions cannot always be made on the basis of a one-to-one relationship. Frequently a course of action affects a number of people, and we must consider all aspects of the decision to be made.

An illustration of this point comes to mind from the professional

life of pastors. As pastors we have obligations not only to the church of God but also to our families. St. Paul says of this latter responsibility, "If any provide not for his own, and especially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel." (1 Tim. 5:9)

The pastor, for instance, receives a call to leave congregation X to assume the pastorate at congregation Y. In coming to a decision he will consider in which congregation he can better use his talents for the work of the Gospel. If he has no family, his thinking is simplified. But our pastor has a family. Therefore he must also decide where the interests of his family will be served. His decision must promote the best possible stewardship of his office as pastor as well as his position of husband and father.

One final point should be mentioned. We serve the welfare of our neighbor primarily through our vocation in life. Today young people often select a vocation solely on the merits of its monetary rewards. The physician, the clergyman, the lawyer, the dentist, the plumber, the farmer, the factory employee—all of these and others are serving the needs of their neighbor. The Christian man should regard his vocation primarily as a position of dignity through which he is providing for specific human needs.

Although the Christian's primary concern in regard to his vocation is not the monetary returns, yet he is not to despise this aspect. Money in itself is a gift of God and is to be valued highly. It is through money that we are able to exchange the benefits of our talents and services. When the plumber comes to the parsonage to repair faulty plumbing, it would be rather inconvenient for the pastor to repay him by standing at his side and delivering a sermon. The sermon might be more beneficial to the plumber than his \$10 fee, but it certainly is more convenient to give him the \$10 and let him hear the sermon on Sunday.

Christian congregations at times reason falsely in regard to the salaries of pastors and teachers. A penurious voters' assembly rationalizes: "Why raise our pastor's salary? Isn't he working for God and for the love of the work?"

Several things are wrong about this attitude. First, the pastor is working for God, but God is not a cheapskate. The Bible instructs the people of God to pay their pastors well. Money also

is a measure of the value of people and services. Is the Gospel worth so little? Second, all Christians should be working for God and in the task which God gives. This view of the Christian vocation is enunciated in the Bible and emphasized by Luther. God has declared that the refusal to pay the man a fair return for his labor and services is a form of stealing. Pastors who encourage their congregations to be penurious are making thieves of their people and teaching them to hold things holy in low esteem.

On the other hand we pastors may be at fault because we expect too little. It must be emphasized with a number of exclamation marks that a pastor is not to be greedy. But after that is said, it is also true that a pastor should not feel guilty in accepting much for his work. Doesn't a starvation salary reflect a low estimate of the work of God? Aren't we teaching people, in effect, that our work is not as beneficial or as important as that of the laborer, the artisan, the professional man? If the church is to teach the world to be just and right in its dealings, the church must set a good example in its own business transactions.

Our little Catechism question and answer, which we have used as a basis to discuss Christian ethics, has many more facets and implications. May this short study lead us to live more and more in grateful worship of Him who purchased us with His life, and may the Spirit of God touch our hearts and anoint our lips that we may be effective servants of God in leading the people entrusted to our care to lives of fruitful service to God and to man.

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