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Extract of
The Maligned God
Chapter 7

Are Faith and Works Separable Elements in Man's Life According to Biblical Anthropology?
pp. 165-177

3. *Was Faith Ever "Alone"?*

Of course, we here find ourselves pretty well right in the midst of Luther's personal formidable dilemma. And we all know the solution at which he eventually arrived. At least we do know something definite about the way he expressed it: "Gerechtigkeit durch den Glauben allein." (Righteousness by faith alone). What does that actually imply in this context? If we say, in our Western, Greek-influenced culture, "the soul alone", "the soul exclusively", or "the soul purely", we do know, approximately, what Western trends of thought are liable to understand by such "pure-soulism". That spells dualism. Personally I might add: it spells psycho-physical disruption, and certainly not unity. It leaves no trace of wholeness in man's ideas about himself. Seen from the viewpoint of original Christianity, in fact, it is bound to mean a wholly unwarranted and most dangerous spiritualistic abstraction; in other words, a fateful pagan infiltration. This is bluntly what the doctrine of an inward soul, separable from its outward body, always means: pagan dualism, spiritualism short and sweet.

I have spoken about general trends of pagan dualism. And now to the specific case confronting us: Is such a non-Christian cultural influence noticeable in the case of Luther's famous "durch den Glauben allein"? I would naturally shy back from suggesting that Luther is a spiritualist and a dualist philosopher. And it would even be a doubtful thing to accuse him of being under the partial influence of such spiritualism and dualism without first giving a thorough study to the documents available in this respect. Under all circumstances it must be a most interesting and important task to find out, as far as possible, what Luther actually meant with his "sola fide" concept. It might be that his pointed "allein" in this present case must be relegated into a different category altogether. I would be glad to be able to say something like that about his anthropology.

In the first place, it should be noted that Luther himself openly admits that his translation has added the word "allein".

"It would have been pointless to tell me that the word `alone is not found in the Latin or Greek texts here, for I was well aware of it...But the word has to be added if the sense of the passage is to be expressed clearly and with proper force in German... `But', says someone, `it sounds bad, and people will understand it as meaning that they need not do good work'. My dear, let me ask you whether St. Paul scandalizes us less by adding `without the works of the law'? `By faith alone' is a formula which you might ingeniously get around and explain away: but this other formula, -- `without the works of the law' -- is so brutally explicit that no explanation can get around it." (Luther's open letter about the art of translating.)

Well, do these words testify that Luther had grasped the true meaning of Paul's language with such admirable clarity? Far from it. I shall now try to demonstrate for you how utterly confused the reformer was regarding certain aspects of Paul's theology. And if he was confused, then you and I might be equally confused. For we are just as far from Paul's cultural environment and his peculiar way of expressing himself as Luther was, or still farther.

Luther's confusion is best shown by his attitude toward another apostle, namely James. Let no one try to gloss over the historical facts in this field. Not that you and I, "progressive Protestants of the twentieth century", have so much to boast of, compared to Luther, in any respect. I know of no denomination today, in fact, that has any reason to boast. On the contrary, I feel I should here rather ask a crucial question which might put us all to shame:

4. Could it be that the Very Presence of a Vehement Debate on Faith versus Works in a given Church is an Ominous Sign that an Anti-Protestant Philosophy of Platonic Spiritualism is Trying Hard to Extirpate All True Spirit of Reform?

Let us make a sincere effort to examine critically both our own thinking and that of Luther. What does the great reformer mean by that remarkable statement of his in the above quotation, that "Paul scandalizes us" with his formulation? Is the Pauline expression "faith without the works of the law" a substantially scandalizing one? Is it "irrational", as some modern Protestant theologians seem to enjoy finding features of downright irrationality in Christ's religion? I am referring to Nygren's famous description of the Christian Agape as a type of love entirely devoid of common sense reasoning. Is Paul's formula just as much an occasion for scandal, seen from the view-point of sound human reason, as Luther's formula "sola fide" appears to be? Let us have a long and particularly critical look at this most crucial question. For if biblical Christianity is all that scandalous and irrational, then I will never dare to state any more that it is a model of realism among religions. I must then simply stop expressing such childish nonsense the sooner the better.

So then, what do we imagine that Paul means by his term "the works of the law"? What does Luther think Paul means by that? What do you and I, theological exegetes of today, think he means?

Well, as far as I can see, there is no reason to doubt how Luther immediately interpreted this linguistic expression. To him those famous words of Romans 3:28 about the simple way in which man is justified, namely

"by faith without the works of the law" means exactly the same as

"by faith without works", -- short and sweet.

Well, if that really was what Paul meant, then Luther must have been perfectly right: Paul's words must then be scandalous indeed. If what Paul says is that man is "justified by faith without any works at all", then that must include all good works. And the logical assumption would be that faith can have an existence without good works, its natural counterpart.

Is that realism? No, that is spiritualism. It is Platonic dualism of the purest make. And since such pagan dualism does not otherwise find any place in the Bible, Paul must impress my logically reasoning mind as scandalous and irrational in the highest degree. And then I can also understand perfectly why Luther felt bold enough to add his word "allein".

"So halten wir dafür, dass der Mensch gerecht werde, ohne des Gesetzes Werke, allein durch den Glauben." Romans 3:28.

Luther would in that case be perfectly right in saying that his addition of this little word was by no means any more scandalous than Paul's expression; for that Pauline statement was bound to be just "brutally scandalous", and "so brutally explicit that no explanation can get around it."

Now then, our great question will be: Was Luther's interpretation right? Was his reasoning correct when he immediately assumed that what he had said was exactly the same that Paul had said? In other words, can we put a sign of equation between Paul's concept of "faith without the works of the law" and Luther's concept "faith alone", that is, sola fide in the sense of "nullis operibus", so "faith without works", barely and squarely?

As far as I can see, this sola fide, in terms of a faith without works, would convey a notion exactly as pagan and disruptive in its platonic idealism as the notion of a "soul without a body". It is bound to imply the abstracting dualism that advocates a sort of "pure spirit" faith.

Was Paul a victim of such Greek "pure-spirit-ism"? Did his anthropological views create in his mind the queer vision of some kind of faith without any bodily substance to it? By "bodily substance" I here mean, of course, some concrete action in which that faith could realize itself. Is Paul's concept of faith just an abstraction, some kind of bodiless specter, dangling in the air, precisely like Plato's "pure spirit"?

No, this would be contrary to what the greatest research experts in biblical anthropology, Catholic as well as Protestant, have arrived at regarding Paul. It would mean throwing overboard the most realistic findings constituting the result of minute scholarly efforts made over the last 100 years. On the contrary, the scholars are amazed to see how completely that man, in spite of his great conversance with Hellenist culture, managed to remain free from any infiltration of Greek dualism.

This would seem to furnish, all by itself, reasons enough for defending Paul's reputation as a philosopher adhering to ideas of human totality rather than inhuman disruption. A priori it would seem rather unfair to suspect that apostle of views of obvious splitness as serious as this. Above all it would appear terribly unfair to make assumptions of such pagan trends in Pauline philosophy without subjecting the apostle's notion -- or rather his linguistic formulation of such a notion -- (the "works of the law") to a thorough investigation.

5. A Fundamental Inquiry: What Does "Works of the Law" Mean in Paul's Vocabulary?

Our question now then will not be, in the first place, What does Luther mean, when he says "the works of the law"? Nor will it be, What do you and I mean when we use that term. True, those

questions too are important enough for our study, and they must be given their proper answer at the proper time. But now, to begin with, this basic question: What did Paul mean? Or, generally speaking, What does Holy Writ mean by an expression it here introduces into its peculiar vocabulary: the deeds of the law?

We here have to do with a combination of words. What do those words stand for, -- singly and together?

"Works", as a general concept, is of course a neutral term. Works may be good, or they may be evil. And now, what about the word "law"? This, as well, has more than one connotation. It may mean something good or something bad, as the case turns out to be. That is probably the great difficulty about the term "law" as a theological concept, and the cause for much confusion.

The law as such is inherently good. Even Paul himself declares that openly: "The law is holy and just and good." Romans 7:12. This goodness of the law is something most of us have got more or less firmly impressed upon our minds in spite of all trends of lawlessness in our culture. So some kind of subconscious notion seems to keep playing a certain game with our conscious mind: "Why, then, should not 'the works of the law' also signify at bottom, simply good works?"

Well, who decides the meaning of any special term? It ought do be the author who has used that combination of words in this or that special context, -- do you not agree? He must know what he intends that expression to signify. Not you and I should decide this arbitrarily.

In other words, in this special case we must not permit ourselves to be led astray by our otherwise most correct notion that God's laws are good. For that idea of fundamental goodness is not particularly helpful to us when it comes to acquiring an accurate notion of what Paul specifically means by his peculiar idiom: the works of the law.

Does Paul by this mean good works? By no means. Let us do our best to submit humbly to the author's consistent intention here. Let us go to the expression in its original Greek form. There it reads: *choris ergon nomou*, without works of law. In this case we must yield to the simple fact that the word "works" (*erga*) has been decisively qualified by a special genitive: *nomou* (of law).

Is that qualification in a positive or a negative direction? It is negative. Can we be sure about that? Well, you need not read very far in that famous epistle to the Romans before you can clearly see the point. When Paul says "*erga nomou*" then he always understands something definitely negative. For what is the state of those works?

6. The Basic Qualities of the Works of the Law

They are dead, hence absolutely worthless. Worse than that: they are something bringing a direct curse upon man's head. (Galatians 3:10.) Could anything be expressed in a more clearly negative way? And the reason for all this negativity is more than evident. What is it? The works of the law are borne on wave-crest, of human pride. They are simply man-made. So precisely not produced by faith or any other God-given virtue. They are identical with paganism

in its most deleterious form. We all know with what desperate earnestness both Luther and Calvin had to fight pagan humanism in their community.

Creaturely pride was at the root of the entire rebellion which is still having its terrible repercussions in our universe. Its essence is self-righteousness, self-salvation, the most stubborn unwillingness on the part of Eros to submit to the gentle principles of the law of love in terms of the Christian Agape. So the works of the law are simple self-aggrandizement, and as such they are the most dangerous pest in the history of Christian soteriology. It goes without saying that this special category of works is totally unfit to have any fellowship with Christian faith. To be sure, they do have the common characteristics of an outward "body". That is indisputable. But what kind of "body"? A foreign body. What does that imply about their relationship to genuine faith? It implies that they constitute nothing but an entirely artificial superstructure, as it were.

To understand this better, just think of a man who has had the misfortune of having a large portion of his skin burned. That skin is part and parcel of the human body, so a living and integrating part of the organism. Now, in order to become whole again that man has the unlucky idea to creep into the hide of a dead animal. Will this restore living totality to him? Of course not. The dead hide will remain forever something altogether foreign, something artificially superadded.

Some of my student have obviously felt that the rather close parallel I venture to draw between the faith-works totality, on the one hand, and the soul-body totality on the other, might not be entirely justified. For the body, they would say, constitutes something undeniably good, doesn't it, something inalienably realistic in human life. What, in that body, could correspond to works in the negative sense, the vain and illusory sense, the depraved and hopelessly corrupted sense

7. The Deeds of the Law -- a Simple Corpse

This is not difficult to discover. The parallelism of the imagery is perfect indeed: To those rotten works of man's own righteousness corresponds one remarkable thing in the workshop of the physiologist: the corpse.

And it was just part of a corpse that the man who had burnt his skin, tried to creep into, namely the hide of a dead animal. This is what I mean by a foreign body here, something "artificially superadded". To that man's life, such a desperate attempt could only mean one thing of course, namely an infinitely increased danger of infection or putrefication and an accelerated death.

Now, suppose again that the same man finally became wise enough to rid himself of the foreign skin with which he had tried to cover his sores: Could we consider this as a disruptive act of cutting away part of his own real entity as a human being? Of course not. Could we call that man a "dichotomist", a "disrupter of totality", "a false dualist" in his special field? No, no, that would be a total misunderstanding of the concept of totality, or the concept of disruption. True wholeness in life only gains by getting rid of false superstructures, by shedding dead hides.

And now to the spiritual field: Would it be reasonable to call Paul a representative of false dualism for the simple reason that he insisted upon throwing away the foreign body he calls the "works of law"? No.

What would first have to happen before we could rightly accuse him of such heterodoxy? There would have to be clear evidence that he had tried to separate from faith its real counterpart; that is, a category of works most realistically and organically interwoven with that faith. It would have to be evident that he looked with contempt and disgust upon works, regardless of kind!

He did not! On the contrary he speaks in a definitely positive way about the "endurance in good works" (Rom. 2:7). The KJV has rendered the singular of the Greek text here with "well doing", since "works" in English, in this sense, does not perhaps have any corresponding singular, although Col. 1:10 indicates that the translators do not seem to be entirely sure about this. Here the apostle encourages the flock to be "fruitful in every good work", 1 Thess. 2:17 is a similar case. In 1 Tim. 2:10, the "good works" are described as the thing that may properly serve as an adornment for the Christian! There is no risk of exaggeration in being "rich in good works" (1 Tim. 6:18); and so on.

Accordingly, what Paul was so eager to cast off could not by any means be that category of works. What he resolutely and emphatically declined was not the works of faith, but rather the superadded "foreign body" traditionally attached to faith, but not belonging there at all, namely man's constantly and shamelessly reappearing self-manufactured robe of righteousness: the deeds of the law. A total separation from that deadly burden was both natural and necessary in the deepest religious sense; so no matter of perverse splitness at all. And in all this Luther seems to have understood Paul perfectly, and agreed with him whole-heartedly.

8. Are Paul and James in Disagreement?

But--you may object--if Luther agreed so beautifully with Paul, then why did he not understand James equally well, and why did he not accept him as an outstanding authority in his field?

I say, without hesitation; an outstanding authority in his field. For here one thing should be duly noted: James is precisely the writer in the NT canon who makes that illustrious faith-versus-works dualism we are here speaking about his special topic for a thorough-going discussion.

In fact, against what should James be polemizing so severely in his second chapter, perhaps the most famous part of the whole epistle, if not just against that artificial duality (so dualism) falsely insinuated by fanciful human reasoning, or perhaps rather by a total lack of basic reasoning:

"If a brother or a sister be naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you say to them, depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled,--notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body, what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath no works, is dead, being alone. Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: show me thy faith without thy works, and I shall show thee my faith by my works."

In other words: please show me that bodiless specter you call your "faith without works", and I shall show you something infinitely more substantial and realistic: a faith made substantial and realistic--by works.

The challenge here is not a delicately muffled one. And the first part of the passage quoted may sound like the sharpest irony. For what type of person is the apostle here describing? It is simply the "pure idealist" who seems to think he is actually "helping" the poor and suffering ones by means of a purely theoretical (abstracted) faith and a purely theoretical (abstracted) charity. This is the incredible dualism of "faith alone". I do not say the ridiculous dualism of "faith alone". For this is too tragic a concept to be laughable. And if there is a drop of irony in James' approach, it is an irony that is heartily solicitous to bring the dear lambs of the flock back to the sheltered fold of sound realistic thought and action.

How could Luther be so upset about this chapter? Did he feel that there was something there directly aimed at making fools of such sturdy Christian theologians as Paul--and himself? Now, of course, he was bound to find, in that chapter, words he had used himself in what he intended to be a most positive and dignified sense. Even the word "alone" comes up. James emphatically points out that "faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone", (i.e., a faith disengaged from the vital context of its corresponding works); at least no living thing can exist in that wretched state of "aloneness"; for faith without works (faith alone) is obviously nothing but a vain abstraction, a nasty trick of self-deception.

Evidently, Luther's concept of "faith alone" was not that empty abstraction of philosophical hocus pocus either. I see no reason to believe that his vision of faith was that of some discarnated monster, or apparition, or ghost. This illusionism or magic simply does not seem to be in the German reformer's line of thinking. In fact, his mind-body realism seems to have been definitely stronger than Calvin's. Therefore he also rejects instinctively, as it were, the immortality doctrine taught by the Church. To him it is part of the "dung of papacy", for it is conducive to such pagan inventions as the purgatory myth. The pure-soulism of Greek spiritualism is not Luther's heritage. And his conception of the human soul is a fairly realistic and wholistic one. So why did he fail to see that faith, as well, is an interiority which is bound to have its corresponding exterior manifestation of God-given works, in order to take place at all? We do not know the full answer to this question; but we do know that this and other truths were kept in reserve for a later and extended phase of Protestantism. A new and still further enlightened generation of Protestants were one day to protest bravely against all disruptive anthropological trends in their minute and most insidious ramifications. Mind-body totality (and along with it any other facet of "exterior"- "interior" totality) still had to be pointed out in terms of its capital significance for the deepest and most central soteriological truths.

But so far the foreign corpuscles of disruption were still a fact. For a long time some large bodies of Lutherans were to find it extremely difficult to include implicit obedience to the commandments of the law of God in the web of their Christian totality. The fatally confusing dualistic connotations, with which the current formulations of a faith-works ideology of the new church seemed loaded, were a constant source of misconception about the core values in the gospel of salvation.

And that dualism is still notoriously alive today, precisely as it must have been in the days of James. Obviously he found it, and fought it, right in the midst of his own parish. I would not dare to make any attempt to measure the "relative seriousness" of different types of dualism. But to demonstrate the fact of their close relationship to each other turns out to be a task important enough.