

What Is a Christian? On Doing Good Works

WALTER SUNDBERG

On the second day of this new year, a fifty-year-old African American father of two, Wesley Autrey, came to the aid of a twenty-year-old white student who had suffered a seizure and had fallen onto the tracks of the subway in New York City. With a train fast approaching, Autrey leaped onto the tracks, covered the man's writhing body with his own, and centered him between the rails. The train cleared them both with just inches to spare. This extraordinary act of selfless courage made the national news and captured the imagination of all who heard it. Reporters naturally described Autrey as "a good Samaritan," interpreting his good work, whether they intended to or not, through the preaching of Jesus Christ. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) is one of those passages of Scripture that people know, even if they have never read a page of the Bible.

In the parable, Jesus praises the selflessness of an outsider. A Samaritan stops to help a fallen man beaten by thieves. Since the man is traveling from Jerusalem, I presume he is a Jew. Why should a Samaritan stop to help a Jew? Jews despised Samaritans. This aspect of the parable is especially fitting in the case of Mr. Autrey. One cannot help but see a parallel: Samaritan and Jew, black man and white man. The incident in the New York subway is all the more marvelous in that it bridges the tragic racial divide in this country. Why should this black man help this white man? But he does. And we are all the better for it. We know the truth of what Jesus says: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13 KJV).

There is more to say here that relates directly to the question before us in this "Face to Face": love versus profession of faith. A love that is willing to sacrifice the self cannot be equated with subscription to a creed. An orthodox believer may demonstrate such love but, as we all know, so may an unbeliever. I would not be surprised if I learned that Mr. Autrey is a Christian; nor would I be surprised if I learned that he is not a Christian. The goodness of his work is not dependent on his creed. In the parable, Jesus praises the good work of the Samaritan in and of itself, apart from any connection to creed; indeed, in spite of creed. The priest and the Levite, custodians of orthodoxy, pass on the other side of the road to avoid the fallen man. Their creed does not show them how to do a good deed. Indeed, their

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What Is a Christian? On Trusting in Christ

STEVEN PAULSON

As with any red-blooded American I am on the side of doing, never mind what *is* on the other side. The problem with the world and its people is that there is too much complaining, milling about in circles, and not enough action. Given the option of watching a WWF smackdown, despite what philosophers call its “hyper-realism,” and a chess game, I would choose action over thought every time. I am a pragmatist, and like any decent Christian I prefer Aristotle to Plato. Act is worth more than thought. The Christian life, after all, is *for something*, and that means doing. Except for a few fuzzy-headed transcendentalists, Americans have abandoned idealism, dualisms (like this column), and gone in for the instrumentality of problem solving in the congregation and at the office. I frequently quote the adage that theology is for preaching. Preaching is surely an act, a deed. I’m all for it. Christian life, just like business, family life, or any other kind of life is to “gitt’er done.” God’s own inner self would also agree, as Thomas Aquinas saw, since God is pure act—*deed* through and through. Christians should aspire to nothing less for themselves. If I must choose believing or doing, I’m with Karl Marx: the thing is not to think the world, but to change it.

Now that we know which side we stand on, what sort of things do Christians actually do when they are being Christian? Two possibilities are presented to us: we could *believe*, or we could *do*. This is tough. One would seem to please God, the other the neighbor (then God, a kind of two-for-one). Now if a person helps me in need, I let them believe whatever they want. Mormons are as helpful after hurricanes as Lutherans, I suppose. But maybe God really wants accurate belief for personal reasons. Maybe God feels lonely without it—or undignified, like a queen coming into court with her subjects facing the wrong way. Because I teach doctrine, you may suspect my rejoinder that in the end you have to think before you can do, so belief is primary. Maybe God commands both—the second table demands works for the neighbor, the first table requires beliefs (like that God exists, or that Jesus Christ died on the cross, or even that Jesus Christ is my personal savior). No, what God wants from us is works for the neighbor and if believing in Jesus helps that, so much the better.

The real problem theologically is in the formulation of the question. It forces

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creed leads them astray because it teaches them that the fallen man may be ritually unclean and therefore should not be touched. It also teaches that Samaritans are heretics deserving of condemnation. But it is the heretic who does what is right and whom Jesus lifts up as the example that points the way to eternal life. Pointing the way to eternal life is what a creed is supposed to do. In this case the creed fails.

This stark opposition between creed and good works can be found elsewhere in Jesus' preaching. In the parable of Two Sons (Matt 21:28–32), for example, it is the work that proves the faith. The blessed son is the one who, even though he says no, nevertheless does his father's will, while the other son who says yes and yet does nothing is condemned. Jesus directs this parable to the chief priests and elders of the people. Their yes to God is nothing but empty dogmatism. Against them Jesus says: "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you" (Matt 21:31). In this shocking declaration, the guardians of creed get their comeuppance.

I realize that these reflections do not fit the categories of law and gospel by which Lutherans usually analyze the matter of good works and their significance (or lack of it) for faith. For Luther, law and gospel are opposed: "If one of them had to be parted with, Christ or the law, the law would have to be let go, not Christ."* What Luther means is that the law kills us because it demands that we do good works. Before this demand, we are helpless because we are sinful. The effect of the law is to drive us to despair and terror. The mercy of Christ opposes law and cancels its authority and effect. This is good Lutheran creed.

Jesus' preaching of the kingdom, however, can never be equated with the creed of any church. It stands apart and goes its own nondogmatic, divine way. In the preaching of the kingdom, Jesus praises good works and lifts them up as signs of hope and love in a selfish and judgmental world. With Jesus' preaching and my own God-given conscience as my guides, I do not despair or feel terror because Wesley Autrey risked his life to save another. Instead I am lifted up by his noble act, inspired by it, and confess with my Lord Jesus Christ what is most certainly true: *Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.* ⊕

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*Martin Luther, *Theses concerning Faith and Law*, in *Luther's Works*, ed. Lewis W. Spitz (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960) 34:112.

us to think of faith as thought, and thought as a more meager type of “doing” than a real act. Furthermore, it forces us to think of faith as a power that I can actually feel or know, and so claim as “mine.” The difference between what we do and what we believe is not what Lutherans mean when they say that *justification is by faith alone*. The devil himself believes everything about Christ and his story, including the matters about immanent Trinity and *communicatio idiomatum*. The devil is a true believer. But remember the devil is also a doer, a pragmatist who likes nothing better than busy hands. The best of all worlds for the devil is for you to do belief.

Faith alone has nothing to do with what *we* believe. It has to do with what Jesus Christ has done and what he says to us now. If we are forced to take our eyes off the prize and look at ourselves, then we would have to come to the most horrible conclusion about ourselves: in faith we are perfectly passive. God is pure act in that moment, or as the Bible says, grace. But since perfect passivity means death (I can’t do anymore) and “merely” receiving a resurrected life, then who wants to aspire to that? Neither my deed nor my beliefs matter then. Yet, here is a freedom the world does not know. Such faith does not fall into the thinking/doing dichotomy. Trust is a new creature listening only to Christ. Faith is my conscience’s certainty that comes through the ears that God is not angry with me, but is gracious and merciful to me on account of Christ alone. In the world of deeds and various beliefs this is nothing. But in relation to God and God’s kingdom, it is immeasurable.

When Paul preached to the Galatians that receiving circumcision would mean that “Christ is of no use to you,” he was not against works and for belief. He meant that trust in works makes Christ idle. Like a magnet, my trust goes to the wrong thing since a deed is ineluctably *mine*, even when given away. The better the deed, the worse the problem. My trust is bound to do this unless Christ frees it. Then from a good tree comes good fruit. O, the pure passivity of faith is a most active thing when the conscience is free from law, wrath, and the power of its own belief. ⊕

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