

# Perspectives



## Prosper the Work of Our Hands

THOUGH, ALAS, THE PASTOR OF “THE LITTLE CHURCH OF WALDEN” OCCASIONALLY has to resort to the “disincentive” of sin and guilt “to keep the flock from going astray,” the church does at least “offer racquetball.” For the modern world, Gary Trudeau sharpens the question of this issue, “Is Forgiveness Enough?” in his “Doonesbury” cartoon strip (April 23, 1995). After all, “Members are far more consumer-conscious than they used to be. The church has to *deliver* for its members! Counseling, social events, recovery programs, tutoring, fitness center—we have to offer it all!” The name of God is seldom invoked, of course, since “God comes with a lot of baggage. The whole male, eurocentric guilt thing” (May 21, 1993).

Trudeau suggests that, for the modern consumer of religion, forgiveness is not only not enough, it is a downright drag, reminding us unpleasantly that there might be something to be forgiven *for*. So does the relevant church need communion *and* crystals? Baptism *and* basketball?

Those are new answers, but the question is not new. Nor is it trivial. Others in the modern world, less upwardly mobile, wonder whether liberation might not be a richer word than forgiveness, arguing that God means to set people free from political bondage as well as the bondage to sin. Or should we speak of transformation, and develop fuller dimensions of God’s re-creative and sanctifying work among us alongside God’s redemptive work? Nazism and apartheid may have disabused us of the liberal notion that the human problem is basically ignorance, and that the remedy is education; but many (maybe most in this generation) still suspect that, in some way or another, the human problem may be illness, for which the remedy would be therapy. The New Testament makes clear that Jesus’ ministry was about three things: preaching, teaching, and healing (Matt 4:23). How will that illuminate the church’s work? Or God’s?

*Word & World* has poked at these questions more than once recently, with authors wondering just what is encompassed in what the Bible calls salvation.<sup>1</sup> Heresies throughout the ages (antinomianisms and Pelagianisms, new and old) have fallen off on one side or other of the horse named “Faithandworks.” Several

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Mark Allan Powell, “Salvation in Luke-Acts,” *Word & World* 12/1 (1992) 5-10; Terence E. Fretheim, “Salvation in the Bible vs. Salvation in the Church,” *Word & World* 13/4 (1993) 363-372; Frederick J. Gaiser, “Your Faith Has Made You Well’: Healing and Salvation in Luke 17:12-19,” *Word & World* 16/3 (1996) 291-301.

essays in this issue refer to Martin Luther's observation in *The Small Catechism* that "where there is forgiveness of sins, there are also life and salvation"<sup>2</sup> – though not all draw the same conclusions from that sentence.

Another Luther citation might prove provocative. Commenting on the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer, the reformer says:

The forgiveness of sins takes place in two ways: first inwardly, through the Gospel and the Word of God, which is received by faith in the heart toward God; second, outwardly through works, about which 2 Peter 1:10 says in its instructions regarding good works: "Dear brethren, be zealous to confirm your calling and election." He means to say that we should confirm our possession of faith and the forgiveness of sin by showing our works, making the tree manifest by means of its fruit and making it evident that this is a sound tree and not a bad one (Matt. 7:17). Where there is a genuine faith, there good works will certainly follow, too.... This is the twofold forgiveness: one inward in the heart, clinging only to the Word of God; and one outward, breaking forth and assuring us that we have the inward one.<sup>3</sup>

Not, of course, that our works are meritorious:

We should not look to ourselves but to the word and promise of God, clinging to it by faith. Then if you do a work on the basis of this word and promise, you have a sure indication that God is gracious to you. In this way your own work, which God has now taken to Himself, is to be a sure sign of forgiveness for you.<sup>4</sup>

What an exciting notion, that "God has now taken to Himself" our own work done on the basis of God's word and promise! If God's work and ours can be thus conjoined, we are anything but ciphers in our relationship with God. The initiative is God's, to be sure, but our striving for a meaningful and participatory life is not dismissed. Indeed, the psalmist's prayer seems to be here fulfilled: "Prosper for us the work of our hands – O prosper the work of our hands" (Psalm 90:17).

Questions that won't go away are probably good ones. So, this issue, despite all its fine essays, will certainly not be *Word & World's* last response to that intriguing question, "Is forgiveness enough?"

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<sup>2</sup>In *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959) 352.

<sup>3</sup>Martin Luther, *The Sermon on the Mount*, LW 21:149-150.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 151.