

## Good Works: Sola Scriptura

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Reformed Congregational Fellowship Conference, April 5-7, 2011

*The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order*, Chapter 16. Of Good Works.

1. Good works are only such as God hath commanded in his holy Word, and not such as, without the warrant thereof, are devised by men out of blind zeal, or upon any pretense of good intention.

In the process of working on this paper, I found myself doubting whether my labor could truthfully be called a good work! The irony, and even humor, of these thoughts did not lessen the genuineness of the question that was thrust upon me. Would my thoughts recorded and printed produce effects that could legitimately be described as having positive value? Even were there to be some worth to their content, how would that worth measure against the investment of time and effort that could have been spent in some other pursuit that could be judged as having greater merit? More troublesome than the questions regarding the results of this paper on good works were the doubts regarding my motivation in working on it. To what degree was I inspired by a vain desire to appear erudite? (I just looked up the word to be sure I was using it correctly.) Even worse, how much was I urged to labor by the hope that I would be seen to be a person of holy aims? How can I, regarding this enterprise or any other, pursue good works without becoming either paralyzed by the choices to be made or indulging in pride?

Chapter Sixteen of the *Savoy Declaration* wisely opens the question of good works with a focus on God's Word, for the theme of good works is developed from Genesis through Revelation. As a document that supports the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, the *Savoy's* understanding of good works finds its basis in the Bible as inerrant and authoritative. As always is the case with theology, then, we rightly begin a discussion to of good works with reference to the teaching of Scripture on this topic.

The creation narrative that opens Genesis has as its central focus acts of God that he explicitly characterizes as good, and in their totality, very good. The repetition of action verbs and the refrain “And God saw that it was good” present the Creator as Good Worker *par excellence*. All his works perfectly embody his intentions, so that none of them come short of or are inconsistent with his will. This perfect harmony between intent and effect demonstrates the ideal of volitional acts, and guarantees that the work accomplished reflects the character of the Worker. The goodness of God’s works reflects the goodness of God himself. The first pages of Scripture, then, provide us with the perfection of good works: works that completely embody the good intentions of the worker.

God, having created man in his own image, ordained that man was also to be a worker. Having endowed man with the ability to reproduce and the capabilities needful for governance, God charged man with the works of procreation and exercising dominion over the earth. Man, like his Maker, would be able to perform works that would embody his intentions. Further, God gave Adam the specifically covenantal work of serving and guarding the Garden of Eden, made as a special work of God as a holy place of worship as well as work. Again, Adam was provided with the ability to will and to do this good work of serving and guarding. Having received from God the prohibition that would be honored by the work of self-restraint, Adam was given the opportunity to demonstrate both negatively (by not eating of the forbidden fruit) and positively (by using his dominion authority to maintain the sanctity of the garden) the good works that would confirm him in righteousness and establish for his posterity the kingdom of God on earth.

Instead, Adam performed evil works, that is works that embodied the intentions of a heart now become evil, works which were contrary to both the model and the mandate of his Maker.

Further, Adam's work of rebellion against God in the Garden of Eden was not a merely one time act, for it rendered him incapable of any good works in his own right, because his will was now enslaved to sin. In consequence, all mankind has likewise been rendered incapable of willing and doing that which is right, unable to perform good works. It is for this reason that Scripture consistently portrays the works of sinful man as evil. They are evil in intent, evil in effect, and if man in his depravity could bring his evil works to their ultimate purpose, those works would destroy that which is good and dethrone God himself. The fact that God limits the power of man's evil working and overrules the evil intention of human works to bring about his purposes does not alter the fact that those works are completely unrighteous before him.

God might justly have visited upon Adam the just punishment for his evil works, consigning him to perdition and ending the human race before it began, but he purposed to accomplish a work even greater than that of creation by redeeming a people who would once again be able to perform good works. That greater work, done through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus, involved two categories, or types, of work. As the Second Adam, the true Israel, Jesus did the human works commanded by his Father, the works of human obedience not done by the first Adam. Going beyond the completion those good works, Jesus also performed the good work of redemption, making atonement for the sins of the elect. Through these works, Jesus has gained on behalf of his redeemed the power and privilege to be able to do good works. Indeed, he has imparted to them his own zealously to do the good works that glorify the Father. "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God

and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.” (Titus 2.11-14 *ESV*) Since it is through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that this happens, it can be said that it is Christ within believers who does good works, and it can further be said that the elect are themselves good works of God. “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” (Ephesians 2.10 *ESV*)

Good works, then, from beginning to end are of God. It is God who gives to the elect the faith that is the necessary prerequisite to good works, and it is God who gives to them the wisdom and strength to exercise that faith through the doing of good works. It is God who provides persevering grace to enable believers to continue in good works until the end when they are gathered as the Bride of Christ clothed in righteous deeds. It is on the basis, then, of what God has done and promises to do that the elect are exhorted to good works. “But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people.” (Titus 3.4-8 *ESV*)

With this as background, we are ready to consider how the *Savoy* identifies the nature of the good works of the saved. Positively stated, “Good works are only such as God hath commanded in his holy Word...” Since God’s Word is the only infallible revelation of himself

and his will, it is the only infallible revelation of what are to be considered as good works.

Customarily, the goodness of works acceptable to God is said to include both their effects and their origins. The effects, or results, of good works are in accordance with God's will as revealed in Scripture. "And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God." (Colossians 1.9-10 *ESV*) In regards to their origins, or motivation, good works must proceed from faith. "But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin." (Romans 14:23 *ESV*) This faith may be invisible to man, but it is apparent to God, as is the lack of it. "Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God." (First Corinthians 4.5 *ESV*)

Good works are those actions that honor the content and the spirit of the Law of God. In both Old and New Testaments the God's Law is centered on love. Citing Deuteronomy in response to questioning regarding the most important commandment, "Jesus answered, 'The most important is, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'" The second is this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" There is no other commandment greater than these.'" (Mark 12.29-31 *ESV*) Paul, too, advocates the indispensable quality of love in First Corinthians 13, providing examples of various good works that he describes as vain without the motivation of love. In this connection, it is interesting to note that

the one act specifically identified by Jesus as a *καλὸν ἔργον* was the anointing of his feet (Matthew 26.10; Mark 14.6)

It is the manner in which believers' works reflect the Law of God that testifies of God's work in them. It is in the context of teaching his disciples the true nature of the Law that Jesus says "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 5.16 *ESV*) That is not to say that good works are always met with approbation. Jesus' own good works were misconstrued by his enemies, even to the point of being characterized as works of Satan (Mark 3.2 and parallel passages). Nevertheless, Jesus declares that it will be through the love that his followers have for one another that the world will know they are his disciples (John 13.35).

Having stated what good works are, the *Savoy* goes on to teach that good works are "not such as without the warrant [of God's Word] are devised by men out of blind zeal, or upon pretence of good intentions." As Luther states in his *Treatise on Good Works*, "We ought first to know that there are no good works except those which God has commanded, even as there is no sin except that which God has forbidden. Therefore whoever wishes to know and to do good works needs nothing else than to know God's commandments." Two hallmarks of false good works are mentioned by the *Savoy*. Ungodly works are often characterized by human passion unenlightened by God. Mere sincerity is no reliable sign of a work's goodness, no matter how attractive it may appear to human observation. As Paul says of his fellow Jews "...I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." -

(Romans 10.2-4 *ESV*) Such blind zeal, in fact, leads not to good works, but to acts of rebellion against God. Secondly, works lacking the sanction of God's Word are frequently discovered to arise out of hypocrisy. As Jesus said to the Pharisees and scribes, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men." (Mark 7.6-8 *ESV*)

Reflecting on my earlier doubts regarding the writing of this paper, I now recognize in them the occasion for enjoying the salutary effect of being held accountable before the Word of God in this matter of good works. Wrong ideas about good works and resulting vain practices abound, and the most effective counter to these will be a constant return to Scripture. It will be the truth of God's Word that will keep me from despair of ever truly doing good on the one hand and a vain self-confidence on the other. The Law will continually probe my heart, uncovering sinful attitudes and prejudices. The biblical narratives will reveal the beauty of works done to God's glory as well as the ugliness of labor that exalts self. The Gospel will break my hard heart with the magnitude of God's grace to us in Christ and plant in me new longings to serve him with a faith that trusts him to produce good works by his Spirit, even in ways unknown to me. And when I am aware of good works that I have done, I will find joy in saying, "I am an unworthy servant, for I have only done my duty."

Thinking pastorally about the use of this section of the *Savoy*, it is clear that effectively shepherding believers to place themselves under the authority of the Word will be the best means to encouraging them in good works. Emotional appeals and inspirational stories will be of no real effect in the producing of truly good works. Castigation and condemnation to motivate

works that are done out of guilt and vain attempts to earn God's favor have no place in our ministry. In fact, all such practices will encourage the "blind zeal" and "pretence" that the *Savoy* rightly condemns. In our preaching, in our teaching, and always in our living before God and in the presence of his people, we are to affirm *sola Scriptura* so that the works we do and the works we encourage are those that will bring glory to our God, who is working in us.