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Why be good?

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WHY BE GOOD?

D. B. KNOX

THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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Why be good? an instructed Christian in any denomination would reply, correctly, "for God's sake". For God is the end of all that we do. As the Apostle Paul put it, "Whether we eat or drink or whatever we do, do all for the glory of God". The whole of our Christian life should be lived as under the eye of God and for His sake. But if we ask the further question, what do we aim at achieving by living a good life? Christians give two divergent answers, one right and one wrong. The teaching of the New Testament is that a person is accepted by God to be His child not because of the moral quality or goodness of his life, for that could never be good enough to meet with God's full approval, but because of the quality of the life and of the redeeming death of Jesus Christ our Saviour. It is for His merits that we are accepted by God both now and at the judgement day. Christian infinite merits do not need supplementing by our moral efforts from the point of view of our being worthy of acceptance with God. We have fellowship with God now as His sons and we will be with Him and see Him in Heaven on death because we have been united with our Saviour through faith, and are already enjoying the privilege of sonship with God. Not only does the Bible teach this, but we also prove it in experience. The Bible promises full forgiveness and acceptance to all who put their faith in Christ and those who have done so know in their experience that it is true, they have fellowship with their Heavenly Father through the redemption that is in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Why then be good? It cannot be in order to go to Heaven because we are already going to Heaven because of Christ's love, if we have put our faith in Jesus. The answer is simple of course. It is God's purpose that we should not only be saved by Christ, but also should be conformed in character to Him, and every true Christian is anxious that he should reflect in his life the glory of God. To the converted Christian the presence of sin in his life is hateful. As he becomes conscious of it through the work of God's Spirit in his conscience, he knows that he may obtain immediate forgiveness as he asks for it. But he still longs that sin should never repeat itself in him, and it is God's purpose that the Christian should overcome sin and so reflect the character of Christ and glorify His Saviour. Sin is incongruous in the Christian life and distasteful and hateful to a Christian. So the Bible answer to the question, why be good? is primarily that we might reflect the purpose of God in saving us. We seek to please Him because He has saved us, and not in order that He might save us. Thus, any element of selfishness in living the good life is quite excluded.

It is, however, well-known that the Roman Catholic Church rejects the doctrine that we are saved only through the merits of Jesus Christ received through faith, and teaches that our own merits are the basis of our salvation. On this view one leads a good life not because we are accepted through Christ, but in order that we might be accepted. It immediately becomes

important to ask what is the minimum required that our merits might be sufficient for salvation? Such a question is, of course, both unnecessary and out of keeping with the Bible teaching that salvation is not based on our moral life but on Jesus Christ only. Then our moral life becomes an expression of gratitude for our salvation and of course nothing but the best should be our aim in wishing to express our gratitude to God Who has saved us independently of our poor efforts at being good. The question of a minimum never enters in. But if it is believed that our salvation depends, to a certain extent, directly on our own merits, then it becomes a matter of first importance to inquire what is the pass mark? what is the minimum standard? This is the theme of moral theology as it has been highly developed amongst Roman Catholics, but as I say, it is based on a fundamental fatal mistake as to God's reason for accepting sinners.

The Bible makes clear that God's standards are 100 per cent perfection. This standard has been fulfilled by Christ, but it is a hopeless standard for those who think that their own efforts are part of their salvation, for who, apart from Christ, can attain 100 per cent perfection? In order to make the attainment of some sort of a standard possible Roman Catholic moral theologians introduce a division between God's counsels which call for 100 per cent perfection, and God's commandments which are said to be on a lower level. They seek to justify this distinction by quoting the story of the rich young ruler in Matthew 19 who claimed that he had kept all God's commandments but to whom Christ said "If thou wilt be perfect go and sell your possessions and come and follow me". It is an unfortunate example to prove that a lower standard than perfection is permissible because the rich young ruler in choosing the lower standard was described by Christ as being outside the kingdom of Heaven and outside salvation.

Seeking to discover minimum requirements, as moral theology does, leads to some queer conclusions. I may illustrate this by a quotation from two well-known books of Roman Catholic Moral Theology, at present in print. The first is a Handbook of Moral Theology by Prummer and the other a four volume Moral and Pastoral Theology by Henry Davis. First let us examine what is said about truthfulness. We know in the Scripture that truthfulness is constantly insisted upon by God as required in us. Telling lies is over and over again condemned, and in the Book of Revelation ch. 22., v. 15, it is stated explicitly that liars are shut out of Heaven. Now moral theology text books do not, of course, approve of lying, but they make it one of the least of sins which in itself is said never to shut out of Heaven, no matter how frequently committed, and which need never be confessed to a priest. Thus Prummer on page 134 states, "lying is a venial sin" and Davis in Vol.II page 412 states

"It is the teaching of all Catholic theologians that a lie is not in itself a grievous sin". On the same page Davis makes clear that for a Roman Catholic to use contraceptives, though for the best of reasons, even once, will send him to hell if he does not confess it to a priest, but apparently he may lie all his life without, for that reason, ever being shut out of heaven or needing to go to confession to obtain absolution. This seems a very strange scale of moral judgements, especially in view of the clear statement of the Bible that God abhors lying.

Or again, in the field of honesty, Roman Catholics are taught that taking other people's possessions without their knowledge and contrary to their will is not always stealing. For example, it is taught that if an employee is sure that the wages he is receiving do not fully cover the work that he has been asked to do, he may compensate himself by secretly taking his employer's money or even property. We would call this pilfering but the moral theologians call it occult compensation and it is justified by Davis in Vol. II page 311 and by Prummer on page 122. Pilfering from Government and company stores and evasion of fares on public transport are sufficiently prevalent in the community without being bolstered up by a doctrine so obviously inimical to public morality. Or again, with regard to the payment of taxes the Bible teaches explicitly that the taxes raised by the Government for the running of the country ought to be paid fully. Thus, Jesus said "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" and St. Paul taught in Romans ch. 13, verses 5 and 6 that we should pay faithfully our taxes for conscience sake; and Peter in his first epistle ch. 2, v. 13, says "Be subject to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake". In spite of this clear teaching of the Bible, Davis in Vol. II page 339 teaches that the payment of taxes, even when it is fully recognised that the taxes are just, is not an obligation in the conscience, but if the citizen is willing to risk the fine he does nothing wrong in evading taxes; though of course Davis does not approve of the employment of fraud, deceit or lying in the matter. But even when taxes are successfully evaded by these sins he states that there is no obligation to make restitution. He urges caution, however, remarking "Even the statement and still more the putting into practice of the complete doctrine on taxation are apt to give scandal and do harm to religion" which might be described as an understatement. One of the reasons why Protestants object to subsidising Roman Catholic schools out of money raised by taxation is because they do not see the justice of paying for the inculcation of such teaching.

These seemingly less than moral conclusions of the moral theologians spring directly from the investigation of a minimum standard and this in turn necessarily springs from the doctrine that our justification is based on our own efforts; for our own efforts can never be 100 per cent perfect. But any

recommended course of morality which is less than God's perfection will have in it strange kinks of immoral conclusions such as the ones I have drawn attention to,

There is no alternative to the Bible standard of 100 per cent perfection. The distinction between God's counsels and God's commandments as though one were of a less standard than the other is without any basis in Scripture. Nowhere does God lower His requirements into something less than perfect, for this would mean that He is willing to condone sin, for anything less than perfect is to that extent under the influence of sin. It follows with remorseless logic that it is impossible that out own efforts should be part of the grounds on which God grants us salvation for He is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity and He cannot base His decision to accept us on something which contains within it imperfection and sin. Thus, we see that the doctrine that we are saved through Christ alone is not only thoroughly Biblical, but also the only logical and self-consistent doctrine. Christ's righteousness alone can cover our unrighteousness. Salvation is offered to us freely on this basis as a gift. Our moral efforts are the consequence of our salvation; they spring from a sense of thankfulness that God has accepted us freely for Christ's sake; they are the result of the Holy Spirit within us. They must always aim at the very highest, for nothing less is worthy of our Saviour. But where we come short there is full and free forgiveness if we are sorry for it and turn back in faith to our Saviour.

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