

Grace for the Day

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Good News for Catholics ... and Everybody

By Rev. Peter Eng

Our last article has generated various responses from people who are in the Catholic tradition. The general drift of the response is as follows:

"We know the Catholic Church has been covering up wrong things and sometimes it is very awkward being a Catholic. We feel a growing ambivalence towards the Catholic Church, but we also feel a sense that there is something that unites all Christian traditions. Is there something that makes us Christian?"

The Good News is that there is!

On the right track

My Catholic readers are totally on the right track with these questions and concerns!

We will examine two contrasting definitions of what it means to be a Christian, and see what the Word of God has to say about who is a child of God.

Two contrasts

As Christians we look to the Bible to define our faith. We ask what it was that Jesus taught. So the tradition of the apostles as represented in the New Testament (not as it becomes modified over time) defines the message of Jesus.

Living here in the Northeast, I have the privilege of meeting so many wonderful people from the Catholic tradition. Some of the most gracious and giving people I know are Catholics. Catholics often emphasize good works as the way to become acceptable to God. Some have a sense that genuine faith is needed, but some have only a vague sense of faith in Jesus Christ. For many people there is no lack of faith, just a lack of clarity. What is regrettable is that this lack of

clarity will leave us wondering if we are God's children, if we will go to heaven, and if we are ok in God's eyes.

There is another group of Christians without any definable name, but they hail mostly from the Evangelical tradition. Many of these committed Christians are not short of clarity on what makes a person a Christian. They will tell you simply, "You are a Christian if you accept Jesus Christ as your Savior." And what does that mean? "It means to pray the sinner's prayer. That is, you confess your sin and ask Jesus to be your Savior." This approach has the appeal of a simple clarity, and gives the individual the assurance of forgiveness through a simple act.

You can see that some people see their Christian faith in a vague hazy cathedral filled with pious smoke. Some see their Christian faith as a single confession in the glare of a fixated spotlight.

The good works tradition suffers from a serious problem. If the Christian faith is about doing good works, why is there a Christian faith in the first place? Don't all religions teach good works? Did Jesus die on the cross and rise from the dead to teach us good works? Nowhere in the Bible can we find any suggestion that our good and bad deeds are placed on some scale and when our good deeds out-weigh our bad, we become acceptable to God.

The sinner's prayer tradition also suffers from a serious problem. There is nowhere in the Bible where we have a sinner's prayer formula that makes us acceptable to God. Another common term used is to "accept Jesus Christ." Like the good works tradition, the sinner's prayer tradition lacks support from the Bible. In fact, the language of accepting Jesus in a sinner's prayer is not found in Christian literature before the 20th century. We may justly suspect this is the product of the age of

instant things, or perhaps of some reductionism of faith.

When we juxtapose these two positions it becomes apparent to us that one is too loose, and the other is-too narrow. To say that good works and some vague faith makes us acceptable to God is vague and lacks meaning. To say that a single prayer rightly executed gives us eternal life promises too much for too little.

Spiritual truth is never the result of speculation. It is understood through the careful study of God's Word. So let us turn to the Bible.

Back to the Bible

The Bible begins with a simple message: everyone starts out a sinner. Since Christians from all traditions agree on this, I do not need to elaborate. We will simply affirm that we agree we need forgiveness of sin.

Sin alienates us from God. While in this life, sin keeps us from having an unhindered relationship with God. And beyond this life, it keeps us from God's presence. Simply put, the penalty of sin is death. "For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:23). This is separation from God

In the Old Testament, God asked the Hebrews to slaughter and use the blood of the lamb so they will be spared certain death (Exodus 12:3,12,13).

In preparation for Jesus the Lamb of God to be revealed, God instructed the nation of Israel to sacrifice one lamb in the morning and one at twilight. God told them that through this sacrifice, "I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God" (Exodus 29:38-42).

When Jesus died on the cross it was primarily as penalty for sin — our sin, not his, for he had no sin. Jesus is the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29,36).

When we appropriate the death of Jesus Christ who died to pay our debt of sin, we are reconciled to God. Jesus paid the full penalty for sin. His death on the cross is sufficient for all the sins ever committed, but it is efficient only to those who receive this gift. The forgiveness of sin and its significance (reconciliation to God) is a free gift from Jesus Christ to us.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

We use the term "salvation" to refer to various facets of what the death of Jesus provides. Salvation means (1) to have our sins forgiven, (2) to be reconciled to God and (3) to have eternal life. This salvation is made available to us through Jesus Christ, and through him alone. One imagery the Bible uses to help us understand salvation is the example of adoption. We are not God's children in our natural state. But when we put our faith in Jesus, we become God's children through adoption.

"Yet to all who receive him, to those who believe in his name, he gave them the right to become the children of God" (John 1:12).

How do we receive this gift from God, this salvation, this adoption? The Bible is very clear on this. We receive it by faith (John 1:12; 3:16; etc.). To receive God's gift of salvation by faith means to simply believe that Jesus' death did the job of providing us salvation.

"For it is by grace you have been saved through faith — and this [i.e. faith] is not from yourselves, it [faith] is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

The Bible is clear about the penalty of sin: death. No good work can pay for the penalty of sin. Paul is very clear on this. We are saved through faith, not through anything we can do. And our salvation is by grace (an undeserved gift). Even the faith that saves us does not originate from us. That faith comes from God. Salvation is freely given by God and humbly received by us. We will not be able to turn to God at any time and say that we contributed to our salvation in any way.

The confusion

I believe the cause of much confusion is over an area that people rarely discuss. That is, "How do we come to faith?" This is the place where the person who does good works is puzzled about why good works do not count when she/he also has genuine faith.

We need to understand that there is only one agent to God: Jesus Christ; and there is also only one means: faith. But how people come to faith can differ!

Some people feel a deep sense of sin and the forgiveness of sin motivates them to come to Jesus. Some people feel alienation, and it is the love of God that draws them. Some people are intellectually persuaded because the resurrection of Jesus drives them to a commitment. Some people are self-absorbed and have no need for God until a crippling illness strikes and they submit to God.

In terms of spiritual experience, some people come into God's presence through the diligent study of God's Word. Some spend their best hour in prayer because that is where they find God's face. Some believers find their best communion with God through service. In serving they internalize what it means for Jesus to come and serve our needs. Some believers give money because when they give what is valuable and dear to them, they learn God's generosity.

Does good works buy us salvation? The answer from the Bible is a resounding "No." Can good works be a means to draw us to God so we can understand his salvation? The answer is "Yes!" *Giving money, service, prayer, Bible reading, etc, are different means by which God instills faith in us! But none of these in themselves can give us salvation, but they can be used by God to teach us faith.*

The conclusion

Salvation is not through faith and good works. We are saved through faith alone. (Ephesians 2:8-9). But faith that saves is not alone! "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God has prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10). In the very passage that tells us our salvation is through faith alone, we are told that the one who has genuine faith will produce good works.

Good works can lead us to faith. But we need to be clear it is not our good works that save us. It is faith in Jesus Christ that makes us God's children.

Isn't God wonderful? What if God puts a good works price tag for those who want to be his children? Only the rich, the well, and the capable can pay that price. God's gift of eternal life is the great equalizer. Nobody can pay his way into heaven. It is a free gift that both rich and poor need to humbly receive.

Contact us for more about what it means to be saved. We will gladly answer your questions! Tell

us your situation and we will provide you a one-on-one free consultation.

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Rev. Peter Eng is an ordained minister from the Reformed Tradition, but he is truly global in perspective. He served the Lord in various capacities starting from his teenage years in the 70s. His undergrad studies were done in Singapore, his grad studies in the USA, and post-grad studies in the United Kingdom, with additional post-grad research in Germany.