

## **“The Five Solas of the Reformation”**

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### **Speech #3 – “The Place of Good Works in Our Salvation”**

(Speech given on December 30, 2014)

Scripture: **Ephesians 2:1-10**

“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them” (v. 10).

#### **Introduction**

Because I have combined my explanation of the “five *solas*” of the Reformation—and of the gospel—in the first two speeches at this conference, I can now, in the concluding speech, address an issue that is not one of the five *solas*, but that is, nevertheless, very much involved in them. This is the issue of the place of good works in our salvation.

The subject of good works came up in both of the preceding speeches, and I had to say something about good works in those speeches. In the first speech, I taught that Scripture testifies of Jesus as the savior. Scripture does not proclaim that we save ourselves by our good works, but that Jesus Christ saves us by His works: His lifelong obedience; His atoning death that paid God’s justice for all our sinful works; and His renewal and sanctification of us.

In the second speech, we saw that our salvation is “of faith” alone, “by grace” alone. God saves us, not of our good works, but of faith. God saves us by grace, not by our own working.

The gospel of grace is the condemnation of the false gospel of salvation by works. Especially the epistles of Galatians and of Romans expose the message of salvation by the will and works of sinners themselves as a false gospel, which is no gospel.

There were two weaknesses regarding the truth of good works in my two preceding speeches. First, neither of the speeches was devoted entirely to the subject of our good works.

Second, what treatment of good works there was, was negative. Good works are not the cause, or basis, or power of our salvation. This negative view of good works is biblical, and important, but it is not the whole truth of the place of good works in our salvation.

What I will do in this last speech at the conference, on the basis of Ephesians 2:1-10, especially verse 10, is explain the place of good works in our salvation *positively*. I will answer the question, “Do good works have a place in our salvation? and, if they do, what is this place?” As I answer this question, it will become even clearer than before that good works are not the source, or basis, of our salvation, and that, therefore, salvation is by grace alone, of faith alone, in Christ alone, to the glory of God alone, as the Bible alone testifies. For even our performance of good works is the gracious gift of God to us and the gracious work of God in us.

### **“The Place of Good Works in Our Salvation”**

#### **Our Creation**

In Ephesians 2:10, the apostle speaks of our creation: “created in Christ Jesus.” By creation, he refers to God’s work of saving us, not to the work of making the human race in the beginning. The preceding verses in Ephesians 2 are a description of salvation. The creation of which the apostle speaks in verse 10 was a divine work “in Christ Jesus,” the Savior. It was a creation of us, the elect, believing members of the church, not of all humans without exception.

The apostle describes the saving work of God in terms of God's making the world out of nothing in the beginning. Thus, there is a comparison of the work of salvation with the divine work of calling the universe into existence in the beginning, as described in Genesis 1 and 2.

For God's work of saving us, the Holy Spirit in Ephesians 2:10 uses the same word that elsewhere is used of God's making the heaven and the earth in the beginning. Describing our salvation as creation implies certain truths concerning salvation. First, our salvation is the work of God, altogether without any cooperation on our part. Our salvation was not our own doing, nor was it God's work *and* our work, anymore than the creation of the world in the beginning was the work of the heavens and the earth, or the cooperation of the world with God the creator. It is impossible to think of a word that would emphasize more strongly that God alone saved us, and that we had nothing to do with our salvation than the word "created." We were "created." This is what our salvation was: a being created by God.

How much did light, the firmament, and the other creatures mentioned in Genesis 1 have to do with their coming into existence? Did they cooperate with God? Did their existence depend upon something they had to do in order to make themselves worthy of existing?

So it was with regard to our salvation.

Ephesians 2:10 is the climax of the apostle's account of the salvation of the sinner proclaimed in Ephesians 2:1-9. The conclusion is that salvation is a work of divine creation of a man or woman as a child of God.

Salvation is by grace—by grace *only*.

This grace is not only unmerited, indeed forfeited, favor on God's part. It is also power.

A second implication of the description of God's work of salvation as creation is that salvation, the salvation of one sinner, is a work of the most tremendous power. That was true of God's creation of the world and of each creature in the beginning. There was nothing. By the word of His almighty power, God made the vast and marvelous universe. That was an act of infinite, incomprehensibly mighty power. Only the omnipotent God could create.

Similar, now, is the work of the salvation of a sinner. The salvation of a sinner is an act that is not a whit less powerful than the creation of the world. In fact, the saving of a sinner, to say nothing of the salvation of many sinners to form a holy church, is an act of greater power than the creation of the world. In creating the world, God had to make something of nothing. But in saving a sinner, such as we are, God had to make a believer out of an unbeliever, a holy person out of a totally depraved person, someone alive spiritually out of a spiritually dead man or woman. Ephesians 2:1 describes salvation in this very way: "You hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins."

Salvation is a wonder—a wonder of divine, infinite power.

"Creation" in Ephesians 2:10 applies to the salvation of one person and to the salvation of the entire church. Think this way of God's salvation of you: He created you. Think this way of God's forming of the church: He created, and is now in the process of creating, the church.

### **How This Creation (Salvation) Took Place**

Adding to the wonder of God's work of salvation as creation is how this work took place: "in Jesus Christ," says the apostle. Look over the description of our salvation in Ephesians 1 and 2, and notice how many times the apostle says that every aspect of our salvation took place "in Jesus Christ." Even the beginning of our salvation in the decree of eternal election took place "in him" (Eph. 1:4).

God saves "in Jesus Christ," and we have salvation "in Jesus Christ," and only "in Jesus Christ." This binds us so closely and completely to Jesus Christ that we know nothing but Jesus Christ and seek all our salvation from Jesus Christ, and from Him *only*.

"Christ Alone!—one of the five "*solas*" of the Reformation.

Jesus Christ is the great and grand new creature of God. He is God's new creature in the midst of this old, fallen, sinful world. Jesus Christ is this new creature as the crucified and risen man. Jesus Christ now is the man whom God has raised up to new life, life that is eternal, life that has conquered and swallowed up death, life that is immortal—beyond the reach and power of death.

Now when God saved us, what He did was to unite us with Jesus Christ by true faith, so that the life of Christ became ours. We were changed. We became new creatures. So, the apostle pronounces in II Corinthians 5:17: "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature." That was God's creation of us, by His word and Spirit.

As a body—the church—we become the new human race. The head of this new human race is not the first, fallen Adam, but the risen Jesus Christ—the "last Adam" (I Cor. 15:45).

The result of this creating, saving work of God is that we are now God's "workmanship," according to Ephesians 2:10. The apostle continues to compare our salvation with God's creation of the universe in the beginning. The physical world that resulted from God's creative work in the beginning was God's "handywork" (Psalm 19:1). Similarly, one who has been saved is God's "workmanship."

The saved Christian and the saved church are the product of a Master Craftsman, the work of art of a Great Artist, the poem constructed by a Skilled Poet. I use the figure of a poem deliberately. The Greek word in Ephesians 2:10 that is translated as "workmanship" is literally the word "poem." The saved Christian and the entire saved church are God's "poem."

Whether one translates the product of the saving work of God as "workmanship," or as "poem," what is evident, and emphasized, is that our salvation is no more what we ourselves accomplished than the existence of the universe was its own accomplishment or than a poem is verse that has composed itself.

"Grace Alone!"—another "*sola*" of the Reformation.

As saved, we are now exquisite. Created by the divine artisan, we manifest ourselves as His glorious "workmanship," even as the universe as the "handywork" of the Creator displays His glory. We who are saved are like a lovely poem, say, by a great poet like John Milton. We display the beauty and glory of God our Maker, and this beauty and glory are the beauty and glory of holiness.

Ours is the beauty of a life of good works.

### **The Purpose of God in Creating (Saving) Us.**

The apostle teaches that God had a particular purpose in saving us: "good works." That is, it was His purpose that we would do good works, indeed walk in good works. We were "created in Christ Jesus *unto good works*." Just as God had a purpose in creating everything in the beginning, so He has a purpose in saving us. He created the sun with the purpose that it shine. He created the man and the woman with the purpose that they praise Him by enjoying and developing the earthly creation, with the human race that they would produce. So, in saving us, God had a purpose: "unto good works."

This purpose expresses the relation between salvation and the good works of those who are saved.

We must take careful note of what the relation between salvation and good works is *not*. We were not saved (created, in the text), *because of* good works, that is, because we distinguished ourselves by performing good works. Neither were we created (saved), *on condition of* good works, that is, on the basis of our performing good works in the future.

Rather, we were created (saved) *unto* good works.

Good works, therefore, are not the cause of our salvation. In fact, in verse 10 the apostle is proving what he has just written in verse 9: "not of works."

But good works are the result of salvation. They follow salvation, as the shining of the sun follows the creation of the sun.

We do not work *to be* saved, but we work because we *are* saved.

God did not create the sun because it shone, or on condition that it would shine, but the sun shines

because God created the sun.

That God saved us “unto good works” implies also that unsaved persons do not perform any good works, indeed, that they *cannot* perform good works. Ephesians 2:1-3 makes plain that the unsaved person is spiritually dead—totally depraved—and, therefore, incapable of good works.

Ephesians 2:10 shows the very idea that an unsaved person can perform good works to be absurd. To enable and empower humans to perform good works, God has to *create* us, that is, save us by an act comparable to creation. How is it possible then that the old world of totally depraved humans, which has not been created anew, can do good works?

To perform good works, to live a life of good works, requires creation “in Christ Jesus.” All that those outside of Jesus Christ, those yet under the power of the old Adam, can do is sin. Their lives are ugly with depravity. They are not God’s “workmanship,” God’s lovely “poem.”

Nor may churches and theologians appeal in defense of their erroneous attribution of good works to the unsaved to a “common grace” of God, that is, a grace of God that is supposedly common to all humans, a grace that is different from the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. For the apostle explicitly states that the work of God that enables and empowers humans to perform good works is His work “in Christ Jesus”: “created *in Christ Jesus* unto good works.” In order to perform good works, one must be in Christ Jesus. This is true only of elect, regenerated, believing, holy men and women.

### **The Place of Good Works in Salvation**

Yet another implication of being created *unto* good works is that good works have an important place in our salvation. Our denial that salvation is *of* and *by* good works does not mean that good works have no place at all in salvation, or that a life of good works is unimportant.

Ephesians 2:10 is the condemnation of the error known as “antinomism.” This is the false teaching that, because we are saved by grace alone, we are free to live carelessly and even in gross wickedness. Ephesians 2:10 teaches that the very purpose of God in saving us was good works—our living lives of doing good works. The apostle stated this purpose of God with salvation earlier, in Ephesians 1:4: “that we should be holy and without blame before him.”

Now, I apply the truth that we have been saved with the purpose of good works. First, God has saved us in such a way that we are men, women, and children who *can* do good works. As we were by nature, prior to salvation, we were unable to do any good work. We had to be changed spiritually! We had to be raised from the dead! We had to be born again! We had to be made holy! We had to be transferred from old Adam to Jesus Christ! We had to be created spiritually!

God has done this. As we read in Ephesians 2:5, 6: “Even when we were dead in sins, [God] hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” This is what “created” in verse 10 means.

Therefore, second, we *will* do good works. Everyone who has been created in Christ Jesus will perform good works. Ephesians 2:10 expresses the certainty: “created...*unto good works*.” God realizes His purpose with our spiritual creation. Will the sun shine after it has been created? So surely will those created unto good works *do* good works. We do not yet perform good works perfectly. We do not perform them always. We do not perform good works without falling at times into sinning.

Therefore, the church needs the preaching of good works; exhortations to perform them; admonitions against not performing them; and, sometimes, even Christian discipline upon members who fail to perform good works, but impenitently perform sinful deeds.

The preaching of good works as the purpose of God with our salvation does not contradict the gospel of grace. But it is the power by which the gospel of grace reaches its goal in us: our *walking* in good works.

## Walking in Good Works

Implied in that part of Ephesians 2:10 that speaks of our walking in good works is that our good works are already there. There they are, and now we are called to walk in them. Not only has God prepared us for good works (by creating us in Christ Jesus), but He has also prepared the good works for us: “which God hath before ordained” (Eph. 2:10).

This ordaining of our good works took place in God’s eternal counsel. It was not merely that God decreed that His people would perform good works, although He did decree this. But God also decreed all the good works that every one of us would perform in his or her life. God decreed my speaking His truth today at this conference, and your hearing of it. God decreed that you husbands would love your wife; that you wives would be submissive to your husband; that you young people would obey your parents; that you and I would worship Him rightly in true churches; that all of us would be sexually chaste; and all the other good works that Christians perform.

We do not create our good works. God has ordained them for us. Each of our good works has on it the stamp: “Made in heaven.”

That God ordained our good works is as necessary as that He created us to perform good works. Only this makes our doing of them possible. This cuts off all boasting on our part, as though we ourselves create the good works that we perform. This encourages us to be ready and diligent in performing the good works that belong to our Christian life and calling.

That God has ordained our good works safeguards the truth that all of salvation is by grace alone. Even our good works are God’s gift to us, part of gracious salvation. To do good works is a privilege, a gift from God.

Yet, we “walk in them.”

We are active. We are willing. We perform them. We do so freely and even eagerly. Our willing walking in good works is part of God’s purpose: “that we should walk in them.” God has no pleasure in robots, mechanically carrying out programmed tasks. He has pleasure in the willing performing of good works by His saved people out of the motive of thankfulness for a gracious salvation.

Note well: the word of God in Ephesians 2:10 does not read, “that we should *do* them,” but, “that we should *walk* in them.” The life of the saved Christian is not that he or she does a good work, now and then, perhaps on Sunday by attending church, or once a day by praying. Walking in good works means that our whole life is a life of good works. It is a life of the love of God and the love of the neighbor. It is a life of good works on the job; in the home; at school; at play; everywhere, and in everything.

It is a life of consecration to God, serving Him, with the motive of thanking Him for a great, gracious salvation. As the sun realizes the purpose of God for it by shining always, so the saved Christian shines always with the light of holiness.

How this life of good works glorifies God!

Behold, in an old, depraved world are new creatures, living a new kind of life, shining with the bright light of holiness, because their God has created them in Christ Jesus unto good works.

To God alone, the glory!