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GOD'S CREATIVE MASTERPIECE

D. Edmond Hiebert

“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God afore prepared that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10 ASV).

This text offers a valid test of the effectiveness of missionary activities in any region or with any specific group of people. Paul's arresting statement declares the outcome of God's activity in redeeming fallen humanity and the resultant activity of those who have been redeemed.

In studying Paul's assertion about the believer as the creative masterpiece of God, three things call for attention.

The Divine Product

What we are

The word translated “workmanship” (*poiema*) means that which has been made or is the result of someone's work. The noun occurs only twice in the New Testament and in both instances it is used of God's creative activity. In Romans 1:20 it is rendered “the things that are made” (ASV) and refers to the material creation. This world is not the result of a chance evolutionary process; it is the direct result of the creative work of the Eternal God. “The heavens declare the glory of God” (Ps. 19:1 ASV). Here in Ephesians 2:10 the noun refers to the spiritual

*Believers as
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creation resulting from the regenerative work of God in human life. "Just as the words of Psalm 100:3 refer in similar terms to the first creation of humankind, so here Paul points to humanity's recreation in Christ Jesus as being wholly a divine work."⁰

The Greek term here translated "workmanship" (*poiema*) is the word from which we get our English word "poem." In a very real sense the redeemed person is God's poetry. If the material world reveals God's handiwork (Ps. 19:1), how much more should redeemed humanity be the instrument through which God reveals his grace and glory. We stand in awe before the majestic beauty of the towering mountain rearing its mighty peak into the blue of the sky. We are entranced with the beauty and perfection of the delicate flower that wafts its sweet fragrance on the evening air. We revel in the matchless beauties of the sunset skies as the divine Artist in flaming colors flings His painting against the heavenly canvas. More marvelous is the beauty of a transformed individual soul set into harmony with the eternal God through redeeming grace. It is truly God's poem, the acme of His creative work!

The translators of *The Jerusalem Bible* here render the noun *poiema* as "a work of art," somewhat expanding the picture. God's creative work is never slovenly or careless and His work with the saints is no exception. God has a profound purpose and plan in carrying through His work with the redeemed—a plan that reaches far beyond present time and place. In accordance with His eternal purpose God is now giving the angelic world a display of His manifold wisdom through the church (Eph 3:10). Moreover, God will use the saints to "display in the coming ages the surpassing riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus." (Eph 2:7)¹ The Church is to be used by God as the crowning example of His infinite wisdom, power and love.

Whose we are

In the Greek word order "we are his workmanship" (*autou esmen poiema*) "his" stands emphatically forward, "His workmanship are we." It puts the emphasis upon the divine origin of the redemption we now enjoy. What we now are is due entirely to His grace. This leaves no room for pride and boasting on our part. "A 'self-made man' is almost inevitably badly made, a jerry-built sample of overweening self-esteem; but when our Maker recasts us in His own image we are... no longer intent on steering our vessel for ourselves, but willing to will and to do God's good pleasure even at the expense of our own wills."² As Paul reminded the Corinthians: "You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body" (1 Cor. 6:19b-20 NIV).

How we became this

With the use of a participle construction, “created in Christ Jesus” (*ktisthentes en Christo Iesou*), Paul explained how we became such a divine “workmanship.” The aorist passive participle declares it to be a past God-wrought reality. In Genesis we have the account of the first creation, when God brought humankind into being; here we have a second creative act, when God brought our spiritual life into being. The first was a definite creative act; no less a creative act is here involved.

In individual experience this new creation takes place at conversion. When repentant sinners in faith accept Christ as Savior, they are made new creatures. God does not merely reform them but imparts to them a new nature. “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17 NIV). But this being made “a new creation” takes place only in union with Christ Jesus. We were “created *in Christ Jesus*.” He was the agent of the original creation (John 1:3), and He likewise is the sphere in which the new creation is wrought. This new creation is begun, continued, and consummated “in Christ Jesus.”

The Divine Purpose

Having shown that believers are God's Masterpiece as the acme of God's creative action, Paul at once indicated the divine purpose for God's Masterpiece. God's work is never purposeless; His deliberate purpose for believers is at once indicated by the words “for good works.” Believers are saved “for good works” “just as a tree may be said to be created for its fruit.”³

Good works and salvation

This reference to “good works” stands in striking contrast to the denial, “not of works,” in the preceding verse. Paul emphatically denies that salvation can be gained by works of any kind, however good they may appear before human eyes (2:9). This exclusion of good works for salvation has a vital purpose, “that no man should glory.” Had salvation been procured by good works of any kind, the inevitable result would have been that heaven would have become a “mutual self-admiration society.”

Clearly, while we were dead in our trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1) we could not engage in meritorious good works of any kind. Then we could only fulfil “the desires of the flesh and of the mind” (2:3). “No matter how amiable or upright a sinner may be in the eyes of men, he cannot produce anything that meets God's standard until he has divine life.”⁴ But now that we have been made “new creatures” in Christ, it is God's purpose that our

works reveal the reality of our salvation. We work not to be saved, but because we have been saved. Good works are the *fruit*, never the *root*, of salvation. To reverse that order is to invite endless confusion and error. That would be like saying that the apples on the apple tree produce the tree. It is the living apple tree that produces the apples, but the apples never produce the tree. Likewise the new nature imparted in regeneration produces the good works, but our good works never produce the new creation. Fallen, sinful human beings must first be made good before "good works" can be produced.

There is sometimes confusion and false teaching on the question of the relation of works to salvation. Christian missionaries relate that there is a prevailing belief in the non-Christian world that human beings must do something meritorious to gain salvation. It has well been said that salvation by works is a universal heresy.

The confusion extends to professed Christendom. The well-known view of Roman Catholic theology is that faith in Christ is needed but that works must be added to assure justification. It fails to accept Paul's ringing assertion in the immediately preceding verses: "for by grace have you been saved through faith;...it is the gift of God; not of works" (2:8-9a). On the other hand, equally to be rejected is any theology which "extols justification divorced from sanctification, forgiveness without a corresponding change in life."⁵ As R.P. Martin notes, "Paul's teaching is travestied when righteousness of living and a high moral tone to life become forgotten on the mistaken assumption that Christians can live carelessly, for if they sin their lapses only give the grace of God more room for display."⁶ Such libertinism which throws off all moral discipline is clearly condemned by Paul's express assertion that those saved by faith have been "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God afore prepared that we should walk in them" (2:10b).

The meaning of "good works."

In the New Testament "good works" (*ergoi agathoi*) are postulated only of the saved. The adjective describes that which has goodness of character and is beneficial in its effect. In a moral sense, as here, it is frequently used of persons and of things. Thus "good works" denotes deeds which are "morally honorable, pleasing to God, and therefore beneficial."⁷ They stand in direct contrast to the works of the law mentioned in Galatians 2:16 as attempts to earn salvation. They are the personal services of those who have been saved. Believers are often encouraged in Scripture to produce good works (e.g. 1 Tim. 6:18; Titus 3:14; Heb. 10:24).

The Bible speaks of “evil works” (Col. 1:21; 1 John 3:12). They are the open transgressions of the sinner, the evil practices of the unsaved as outlined in Ephesians 2:2-3. Such evil deeds cause malignant evil, pain, and sorrow. It also speaks of “dead works” (Heb. 9:14). They are the deeds of the outwardly moral and religious sinners, but their works are dead because they have no spiritual life in them. By contrast believers are presented as engaged in “good works”, works that are beneficial to others and have God’s approval.

Believer’s “good works” are the services by the redeemed individual in conformity to the will of God (Eph 2:14). In the sentence “created in Christ Jesus for good works, *which* God afore prepared,” the pronoun rendered “which” (*hois*) may be understood as masculine and the expression rendered “*whom* God afore prepared.” So understood the statement asserts that God has prepared the saints themselves to walk in the good works in view when He made them new creatures in Christ. But it is commonly accepted that the pronoun *hois* is used for the neuter *ha* by attraction to agree with the words “good works” (*ergois agathois*) just before it. The context clearly supports that the reference is to the “good works” which God prepared beforehand for the saints to walk in. But the fact that God did indeed equip the believers to walk in good works is clear from the assertion “created in Christ Jesus for good works.” In His work of regeneration God implanted in the believer the ability to do good. If God is to adjudge the services of the believer as “good works”, they must arise as the outworking of the divine will in his or her life. Any works, however apparently good in themselves, if contrary to God’s known will for that believer, are not “good works” in God’s sight. Good works are deeds and services in loving obedience to God’s known will.

Their importance

Good works are impossible as a means of salvation, but they are nevertheless vitally important as the proof of the reality of our salvation. Whenever a professed believer does not manifest any good works we may well question whether he or she has truly been born again. Clearly good works are God’s will for the believer. Jesus Christ “gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a people for his own possession, zealous of good works” (Tit. 2:14 cf. 2 Tim 3:16-17). Jesus instructed His disciples, “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works, and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:16 NRSV). The Gospel is not only a wonderful message of free salvation; it is also a trumpet call to active service on the part of the saved.

The Divine Plan

The reality of the plan

God has a plan for the lives of His redeemed children. Many believers, confronted with this truth, have been brought into a revolutionary experience. It is only reasonable that our loving Lord should have a plan for His own! Intelligent workmen have definite plans for the impressive works of their hands. The architect has his plans all worked out in detail before the first spade of dirt is turned in the construction of the giant skyscraper. The shipbuilder has a complete plan for the vessel even before the first timbers are laid. The general has his plans for his soldiers on the field of battle. Why then should it be thought incredible that the omniscient God should have a plan for the lives of each of His redeemed?

God has a plan for all of His vast creation. The scientific study of our universe reveals a definite plan and order in all things He has created, from the tiny atom to the measureless expanses of the starry skies. Everywhere there is evidence of creative purpose, plan, and order. Even the little snowflakes that come fluttering down from a wintery sky are constructed according to a definite design. Every one of them is formed around a methodical six-sided arrangement; according to scientists every individual snowflake has its own peculiar plan. There are no two snowflakes exactly alike!

If God can create such infinite variety in the little snowflake, surely He can be trusted to have a plan for our own lives. Someone has rightly said, "In all the ages there never has been and never will be a man, a woman, just like me. I have no double."⁸ Each life is a fresh thought of God.

The preparation of the plan

Paul stresses that the preparation of this plan for believers is in the hands of God: we were "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God afore prepared." The aorist tense verb rendered "afore prepared" (*proetoimasen*) is a compound form which occurs elsewhere in the New Testament only in Romans 9:23. The simple verb means "to prepare, to make ready," while the preposition *pro*, "before, beforehand," stresses that God's action in preparing these good works for believers has already taken place; the aorist tense views that work as accomplished. The preparation of those works took place in time past and now awaits to be performed by believers as they appear on the scene of history. Henry Alford points to the analogy of the tree and its fruit. ... "they were created for fruits which God before prepared that they should bear them: i.e. defined and assigned to

each tree its own, in form, and flavor, and time of bearing. So in the course of God's providence, our good works are marked out for and assigned to each one of us."⁹

This same verb is used of God's preparation of believers as "vessels of mercy, which he afore prepared unto glory" (Rom 9:23 ASV). The great Architect of our lives has already prepared the character of the "good works" we are to do. "And if one asks us where we are to find these good works, the context suggests the answer: in Christ Jesus, in whom we are created Christians."¹⁰ These good works are the fruit of God's regeneration; as the fruit of that new life they reveal its true nature.

The living out of the plan

Long ago God prepared His plan for our life of good works, "that we should walk in them." The plan is ready and waiting for us to live it out, but it remains unfulfilled unless we find it and seek to follow it. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to guide us in the understanding and acceptance of God's plan for us in the light of the scriptural revelation of His will. As obedient children we follow the plan of God for us as we seek to live in fellowship with our precious Lord and Savior. As Westcott remarks, "However definitely the action of the Christian may be limited by his inheritance and his environment, by his powers and his circumstances, he is still responsibly free; and by true service he can realize his freedom. No necessity constrains him, but 'in Christ' he can fulfil his own part."¹¹

We may not always understand all that God has planned for us, nor to see the significance of some of the features of the plan, yet we can trust that our loving Lord has planned it all for our eternal good. When His plan develops differently than we had thought or hoped, we can yet trust His wisdom. In such an hour it is a comfort to know "that to them that love God, He works all things unto good, to those as called ones according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28 literal rendering). In the assurance of a fully yielded will, may we say with the poet,

I like to think
That all my life was laid
In Thy great plan of love, my Lord;
And that according to Thy Word
Its changes have been made
From link to link.

God has made His plan for our lives with the intention "that we should walk in them." In the original the verb "should walk" (*peripatesomen*) is in the aorist subjunctive, suggesting that it is God's intention that we should effectively walk in His plan as an accomplished reality. He desires

our life to be lived according to His plan. A believer can generally live in keeping with God's will for him and yet miss God's will in certain events or parts of his life. Abraham, given the glorious promise that he would become the father of the chosen nation, yet missed God's plan for him in relation to the birth of Ishmael. David, the man after God's own heart, missed God's plan for him in his sinful relations with Bathsheba. It is sad when today Christians do not fully fulfill God's plan for them.

The expression "should walk in them" does not imply that only those who are engaged in some open, spectacular form of Christian ministry are truly walking in good works. The verb "walk" (*peripateo*) quite literally means "to walk around" and well denotes the daily round of human activities. It includes the daily routine of the humble believer in the activities of the daily toil needed to earn a living, who can be mindful of God's call upon his life, and intent upon revealing God's truth and love in word and deed as God opens the way for him. The self-centered, self-willed believer will inevitably fail effectively to live such a life of God-pleasing service.

To find God's plan for his own life, one must believe, on the basis of God's Word, that God has such a plan for one's life. Believing that God has a plan for their lives, believers must ask God to reveal it to them. They must be open to learn and appropriate the Scriptural teachings concerning God's will. Having asked God to reveal to us His plan for us, we must be willing to accept and obey as much as God reveals to us. God does not often reveal His whole plan for our lives at once. But He will reveal enough of his plan so that we can actively appropriate and obey His leadings. We must be willing to take one step at a time as God leads. If the next step is not clear, the yielded believer patiently waits until God reveals what the next step should be. Either impatiently to rush ahead of clear leading or to refuse to accept what He has revealed as His will for us is certainly to miss some phases God's plan in our lives.

God does not treat us as puppets in making His plan known to us. As beloved members of God's family He desires us actively to cooperate with Him as He reveals His plans for us. It has always been true that God-yielded wills find the God-planned life.

God has a plan for every life, therefore one for mine;
 He is the architect and I would for His glory shine;
 And yield so fully to His will that He may it unfold:
 I know His ways are infinite, His goodness is untold.

It is the very best that He could do for me in love,
 His thoughts are higher far than mine, He seeth from above;
 His ways I may not comprehend, but I can surely trust;
 I know that He is merciful, most gracious, wise and just.

I do not want to thwart His plan by wilfulness, nor grieve
My loving Friend, who knoweth best, but humbly would receive
All that befalls me every day, as coming from His hand,
And thank Him when I may not see or fully understand.

It all will work for glory to His holy, blessed Name,
And through the ages yet to come His grace He will proclaim
By all His kindness unto me, through Christ, who saved by grace,
And I shall fully see His plan when I behold His face.

Yes, I am now His workmanship, created for His own,
He has prepared my works for me, they are of Him alone;
I simply have to yield to Him, and He will work in me,
And show in me His wondrous grace, now and eternally.

—A. E. R.¹²

ENDNOTES

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⁸ Source unidentified.

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