

# The spontaneity that faith gives: Not instinct, but common reason

Q1: Upon hearing the gospel do we **spontaneously** do good?

A1: No, if **spontaneously** means that upon hearing the gospel we **instinctively** know and do the good.

It has been said that good works should be as spontaneous as running to pick up and comfort a hurt child. But picking up a hurt child is a matter of natural **instinct** and Luther's revolution in morals was not the advice: Follow your instincts.

Moreover, no motivation, not even the gospel or one's good intentions, sanctifies a work or makes it a "good work."

Q2: What is the **spontaneity** that faith gives?

A2: As Gerhard Forde demonstrates, it's the freedom to use our heads in the battles of life. We are free to be human, free to use common reason to solve problems and fight evil.

"[The two kingdoms doctrine's] great contribution to the problem of social ethics is exactly to **strip men of their mythologies**. For the very fact that it insists that whatever other kingdom there is, **the eschatological one comes solely and absolutely by God's power alone** means that the only real task for men is to repent, to turn around and take care of this world as best they know how – without myth, but with **reason, love and justice; to be pragmatic**: to solve problems concretely.

"The eschatological vision makes it clear that **the secular is our sacred task**. It tears the mask from our pretensions and bids us become human beings. That, I think, is the real significance of Luther's resistance to the Peasant's Revolt, whatever we may think of his final action. He saw quite clearly that if one is to apply this principle, then there could be **absolutely no exceptions**. Not even those who undertake revolutions for the sake of so-called 'Christian principles' can be excepted. Nobody, Prince, Peasant, Preacher, President or what have you, carries out a revolution or a political program in the name of Christ. That is so first of all because **Luther categorically refused to allow Christ to become a club with which to beat anyone (a 'New Law' as he called it)**, and secondly because revolutions and political programs can be carried through only in the name of humanity without appeal to either myth or religion. Luther means that quite radically. **You don't need Christ, or even the Bible, necessarily, to tell you what to do in social matters. You have reason, use it!**"<sup>1</sup>

Q3: Does faith give us power to grow in holiness?

A3: No, faith is not about us growing in holiness, but about us using law and the sword to protect individuals and society that life may endure.

"[O]ne grasped by the eschatological vision will recognize the continuing need for the law. But this too does **not** mean **a third use**. Rather, just because of 'rebirth' in faith, one will see how much one is a sinner and will be until the end. One will see that one is not yet a 'Christian.' One will see precisely that one has no particular advantages over those who are not yet reborn."<sup>2</sup>

Q4: Does faith give us **power** or **freedom** for works?

A4: Faith gives **freedom** for works.

"It is usual to regard the relation between faith and works... as a relation between power and performance. Faith is supposed to give the power for works. This way of speaking requires to

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<sup>1</sup> Forde, "The Revolt and the Wedding: An Essay on Social Ethics in the Perspective of Luther's Theology," *The Reformation and the Revolution*, 85-86; emphasis added here and hereafter.

<sup>2</sup> Gerhard Forde, "Justification and This World," *Christian Dogmatics* II, 450.

be very critically examined. The basic relation of faith and works is **not** the communication of **power** for works, **but** the communication of **freedom** for them – that is, **freedom** to do the works in their limitedness as works and therefore also in the limitedness of the powers that are at our disposal for them.”<sup>3</sup>

Q5: What did Luther mean when he said: “Sin boldly, but believe even more and rejoice in Christ”?

A5: “Sin boldly” or “sin bravely” means fight your instinct to seek peace in your own holiness and to trust in your own works.

“Luther’s key statement, that the Christian is “sinner and just” at the same time, is the most pointed formulation of the **moral revolution** being carried out here. Against the background of the Middle Ages—which were by no means past in any respect—Luther can even be said to have been carrying out an **immoral revolution**. This became manifest when he wrote to Philipp Melanchthon from Wartburg Castle, appealing to the younger man’s Christian conscience with the provocative words: sin bravely, but believe even more and rejoice in Christ...”

“Sin bravely” is a challenge to fight the “old” conscience and cast it off as a suffocating yoke. “Believe even more and rejoice in Christ” is the call to the freedom of a Christian. Luther had accurately forecasted the obstacles that stood in the way of Evangelical freedom in the summer of 1519, during his second course of lectures on the Psalms. There would be “storms sweeping over the conscience” when faith clung to its hope in God without seeking refuge in good works. At that moment the idol of good conscience would demonstrate its power.

“The Christian walks a “straight and narrow way.” This is not a reference to the “straight gate” and the “narrow way” of those monks and puritans who forgo the joys of life on the “broad way” so as to maintain clear consciences. No, it is a difficult, a painful path because it leads to the nearly mystical experience of being torn out of one’s conscience, **the conscience that seeks peace in its own holiness**. Centuries of Western formation of conscience must be overcome if saying yes to God means saying no to one’s own conscience.”<sup>4</sup>

Q6: Does Christian freedom mean that we are relativists, that anything goes?

A6: No. “Freedom from the world makes us free for it,” as Forde writes in the block quote below.

Our job is to fight evil. Again Forde: “For in the final analysis, all man’s vocations are to be enlisted in the battle against the devil.”

“The line between this world and the next is drawn by God’s grace. This establishes the world as a place under the law in which man can live, work, and hope.... Hope in the world to come creates the faith and patience to live in this world; it gives this world back to us by relieving us of the burden of our restless quests. **Freedom from the world makes us free for it....**

“This is what it means to say that whereas the kingdom to come is a kingdom of grace the kingdom of this world is a kingdom of law.... Law belongs to earth, not to heaven. It is natural, not supernatural....

“That is why Luther did not speak of law as something static and unchangeable. Laws will and must change in their form as the times demand. Luther, for instance, refused to grant eternal status even to the laws of Moses. They are strictly ‘natural,’ he said, not unlike the common law of any nation. Men on this earth simply don’t have access to eternal laws. But men do have **the gift of reason and the accumulated wisdom of the ages as well as the Bible**. Here is the task for man’s reason and created gifts. Once cured of religious and mythological ambitions, they can be put to work as they ought: taking care of men. For in the final analysis, all man’s vocations are to be enlisted in the battle against the devil.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Gerhard Ebeling, “The Necessity of the Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms,” *Word and Faith*, 404.

<sup>4</sup> Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, 320.

<sup>5</sup> Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 110-11.