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Module 8

Faith and Good Works: Koinonia and Diakonia Perspectives

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I. Introductory Remarks

In the following, the concepts of koinonia, reconciliation, justification and diakonia, are going to be applied in order to offer a biblical, doctrinal and theological description and understanding of faith and good works, from a Christian point of view. It investigates on the assertions that in the past and even today some Christian denominations strongly teach on performing good works as a warrant towards attaining salvation. They tend to apply some biblical texts to support their views. This has led them to insist more on vertical relationship with God, and less or not at all, on horizontal relationship with fellow human beings. Such an approach is just reversing to the ecclesial practices such as selling of indulgences against which Luther strongly spoke in his 95 theses. Theology that was strongly criticized by Luther argued that human deeds or merits were not only necessary, but also a kind of a “ticket” for securing eternal life. However, it’s also not right to separate one’s faith from her/his daily life – this would be very much in contradiction to African perception of life, of which religion is inseparable and involves serving fellow human beings.

We will seek ways and means through which one’s faith is not and should not be replaced by deeds, but how good works should grow out of one’s faith.

II. Koinonia

Koinonia is a Greek word for communion. It is frequently used in the New Testament, to refer to the union and communion of the triune God within Godself, pertaining salvatory plan to the world (Acts 2:42 ; I Cor 1 :9). It points to two views. First, God is a Union who lives in a divine communion (Gunton 1993: 214-217). Accordingly, the very essence of God is not the solitary ego, but relationship which is also the heart of all reality. Hence, “a solitary being cannot ‘give’ or ‘love’ unless ‘another’ enters the scene to receive and be loved (Thiselton 1995:155). Secondly, God

interacts with human community despite the fact that the image of God in human beings was distorted by sin.

The Apostle Paul uses the word *koinonia* when he writes about Christians who share in God's grace and thus picture the image of the triune God. '*koinonia*' has been used as a key concept for expressing the divine nature of the church and her communion with the triune God (LWF 2009: 94-95).

There are three dimensions which belong to *koinonia*: worship/celebration (*leiturgia*), proclamation/witness (*kerygma*) and service (*diakonia*). All three are interrelated, in a way that each one is rooted in the other two; to the extent that one would not exist in the absence of the other. Moreover, *koinonia* demonstrates a peculiar kind of communion that Christians have with God and with one another in Christ, as well as with other fellow humans, having been marked by mutual sympathy and concern. Thus, *koinonia* has been regarded as the best model to represent and interpret the Christian faith.

III. Reconciliation and Justification: Luther- Luther's views

Koinonia is best perceived when seen and related to biblical concepts of reconciliation and justification. Martin Luther and other reformers strongly insisted on reconciliation and justification as God's gracious gifts to humans for salvation. Pauline literature, particularly Romans, Galatians and Philippians, are the most important biblical sources for Lutheran understanding of reconciliation and justification. Luther says:

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it, the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, the one who is righteous will live by faith" (Romans 1:16-17). [Likewise], "...in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. (2 Cor 5:19) It entails forensic declaration of righteousness (or justification) with which, by and through the grace in Jesus, one becomes a new creature (2Cor 5:17). It implies new life of salvation, lived and experienced through new relationship with God in Jesus Christ and fellow human beings of which both relationships cannot be separated (Harjula 1976:62,69).

Passionately and strongly, Luther insisted on justification through grace and faith in Jesus Christ, and not human merits; because God's righteousness makes the ungodly righteous (Romans 4:5). Merely by good works, even when they are performed by angels and apostles one cannot attain neither righteousness nor salvation.

This is possible only through the famous solae (four sola's – "only"): only through the Word (*solo verbo*), only through grace (*sola gratia*), only through Christ (*solus*

Christus), and only through faith (*sola fide*). All denote a unique form of communion where the loving and just God has reconciled himself with humans, giving them his own righteousness. Out of gratitude for God's grace which we have received as a gift, we are called to be gracious also with our neighbors, to seek reconciliation with them and to serve each other. *Diakonia* cannot thus be separated from what the church believes because it proclaims and celebrates her faith (LWF 2009: 28-29). It entails bringing God's message to the fragmented world. It implies liberation from sin, which connotes the state of being justified. As such, looking only at oneself, one sees oneself only as a sinner; but looking on Christ, one sees oneself as fully righteous (hence the famous Lutheran "*simul iustus et peccator*" – *justified and sinner at the same time*) because Christian life is conditioned by the struggle between what we already are in Christ and what we continue to be as sinful humans (LWF 2009:36). Thus, a believing Christian is free from sin through faith in God, whereby bound by love to serve her/his neighbor. Our response to God's gracious initiatives towards humans asks Christians to practice love through diaconical works.

Moltmann defines and describes love as 'the self-communication of the good'. The crux of his thesis has roots in the nature of the good which makes one to go out to other beings, to participate in other beings lives and to give itself for other beings. Such perception was one of the 19th century missionaries' motivations. In Yri's words, "Men were constrained by Jesus' love to leave home and country for the non-Christian world" (Yri 1978:27). Lutheran missionaries proclaimed the gospel in Jesus Christ, God's love towards human beings and the fact that salvation is solely the work of God (*Fides adventitia*), emphasizing thereby the importance of faith (Gal 3:23,25). Paul echoes, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love" (Gal 5:6). Faith finds expression in works of the free service.

It poses a question whether or not biblical texts, according to Paul and James, regarding faith and works (James 2:14-26), are complementary or contradictory? While Paul like Luther insists on faith alone, James insists on faith and good works (Rom 4:1-9; Gal 3:7-14). For Luther, faith is like an empty hand through which, and only by grace, we receive faith and salvation in Jesus Christ (Harjula 1976:60). Along this line, Paul's and James' perception of faith and works are not opposing each other in the sense that both use different languages to portray the same reality; the conviction that living faith bears good fruits (Rom 6:1-11).

What Paul calls faith and grace in Jesus Christ, are to be reflected in good works according to James. However, James was only opposing false teachings on faith, taught by heretical teachers of the day (James 2:14-26; Harjula, 1976:71). "For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law" (Rom 3:28). Justification is apparently not something for which we work, just like salvation is a gift from God. Thus, good works are not determined by observing the law or commandments. However, this does not mean a rejection of the law or commandments but rather an interpretation and understanding of them in the light of the gospel (Rom 13:10). Nestingen and Gerhard write: "...the commandments are meant to convince you that you can't make it alone- that you, and all of us, need God's promise in Christ. [Luther regards] the First commandment, [as] the whole sum of the law and whole sum of the gospel,...because it

requires faith of the whole person, our fear, love, and trust; our hearts, souls, minds and strength” (Nestingen & Forde 1975:15-17).

Commandments admonish us to do good to all men, help them and promote their interests (see Luther’s *The Large Catechism*). It is justified by the fact that six out of ten commandments, from the fifth to the tenth, strongly insist and admonish us not only to believe, fear and love God, but also to love and help our neighbors, thus avoiding doing bad things or committing sins against them as well as their properties. It entails fearing and loving God so that we do not neglect his Word and the preaching of it but regard it as holy and therefore gladly hear and learn it (Luther 1963: 3-8). It should be noted that good works are performed in relation to faith, having been regarded as the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). Therefore, good works are not the outcome of observing law, rather the means of expressing our gratitude to God because God has already received us in Jesus Christ (Harjula 1976:71-72). Even though Christians do not perform good works so that they may be redeemed because they have already been redeemed; good works still appear as fruits of faith and redemption (Sholten 1968:8).

From ethical point of view, Luther maintains that it is necessary that the substance or person be good before there can be any good works, and that good works proceed from a good person. In his treatise “The freedom of a Christian” he says: “The following statements are therefore true: “Good works do not make a good man, but a good man does good works; evil works do not make a wicked man, but a wicked man does evil works.” Consequently it is always necessary that the substance or person himself be good before there can be any good works, and that good works follow and proceed from the good person, as Christ also says, “A good tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit” (Mt 7:18) (Luther 1957:361). In other words, what we believe must eventually make a difference to what we do, leading us to practice a Christ-like love and concern to fellow humans. Along this, a person who has been justified solely through faith, has to bear fruits and not deeds according to the gospel and not the law. This is so, because faith by its own nature brings forth good works but it cannot be grounded by them because they don’t justify the believer.

Luther’s radical understanding of justification leads to a new understanding of ethics from soteriological and sociological perspectives in a way that enables one to render diaconical service to the world. Living faith is seen through one’s entire life; at home, at work, on journey and in relationship with other people (Harjula 1976:71-72). From the praxis’ point of view, faith alone enables a believer to interact with God through Jesus Christ by grace and faith (vertical relationship) as well as to interact with neighbors in love (horizontal relationship), thus restoring in him the broken image of God.

IV. Diakonia

Diakonia is a Greek word which means service. The word appears 102 times in the NT. It indicates on how the early followers of Jesus were deeply impressed by his person and ministry, leading them to regard diakonia as the New Testament major characteristic of all ministries.

The Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement defines diakonia as a responsible service of the gospel by deeds and words, written and proclaimed through lovely deeds by Christians, in response to the needs of people, e.g. the vulnerable, sick, poor and marginalized. It means supporting, defending and empowering them. It implies practicing diaconical works which open up true access to the perception of the Christian faith. Thus, diakonia cannot be separated from what the church believes because it proclaims and celebrates her faith (LWF 2009:28-29).

The words *koinonia* and *diakonia* both relate and interrelate in a close relationship. The Apostle Paul perceives diakonia as an expression of koinonia. He uses the expression 'koinonia of diakonia' (2 Cor 8:4); whereby grace is a key word for perceiving the incarnate Jesus and his salvific work. For him, living in Christ implies being in his grace and therefore, participating in his continued and active work of love (LWF 2009:28-29). On this basis, God's primarily concern and interest is not the church (which holds a secondary concern) but rather the world, from where the church has been called and sent. Hence, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16). The text is a proclamation of God's salvatory plan to the world, based on the conviction that it is the triune God who takes initiative. Creation and redemption are the starting point for the Christian faith (*koinonia*); love, grace, faith and justice are the starting point for diakonia. Koinonia exemplifies union and communion, essential for creation and humanity; diakonia in turn exemplifies testimony and witness to the Christian faith. It serves as the deeds growing out from the gospel without which Christian faith would lose its roots and meaning in the real life; diakonia should thus always be embedded in what the church proclaims and celebrates, avoiding the risk of becoming mere social action, determined by secular interests and goals (Scholten 1968:7).

The most crucial question is, "How does the church respond to the needs of the people?" (LWF 2009: 40-41). Diakonia should communicate both vertical and horizontal dimensions of Christian faith in an inseparable manner. Without vertical dimension, koinonia remains unrevealed, and therefore loses its foundation in the gospel and in Jesus Christ. Without horizontal dimension, diaconical witness and proclamation remain only at a theoretical level, contrary to the biblical witness. Both dimensions are the means to express the nature and the scope of koinonia, reconciliation, justification and diakonia, and their relation to Christian faith and good works. It challenges the church to be aware of the fact that diakonia shouldn't be neither plainly spiritualized, conceptualized nor limited to good works only. Rather it should be a by-product of faith and grace in God through Jesus Christ. This does not mean regarding 'good works' as the means for obtaining merits before God; rather they are only fruits of faith in God. Good works only serve as an expression of the new life in Jesus Christ. Regarding the doctrine of justification, in relation to grace and faith, we believe that God has unconditionally justified and redeemed us. The justified shouldn't nevertheless reject this grace, but live and walk in it. This is deeply connected to Luther's understanding of God's love to the world. For him, justification through faith implies being justified by God's grace in Christ only. It has two equally fundamental dimensions. On the one hand, it denotes being part of the body of Christ, and therefore, belonging to the justified

children of God. On the other hand it implies being one with Christ in God's mission to the world, as well as living with him a life of a justified person to which koinonia belongs as its essential part.

Luther says in "The Freedom of a Christian": "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all" (Luther 1957: 344). He further maintains: "...a Christian does not live in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love" (Ibid., 371). Luther's perception contains the whole Christian life, the conviction that Christians believe that God has taken care of their eternal secure in Jesus Christ; Christians in turn have been set free to be God's agents in caring for others. Luther affirms on how koinonia, reconciliation, justification and diakonia relate and belong together. It entails having good relationship with God, as well as fellow human beings and the entire creation. Having harmonious relationship with God and fellow human beings as well as with the whole environment belong together. It demands addressing peoples' needs and problems like poverty, suffering and injustice versus human rights because human beings – whether individual or communal – not only depend on each other, but also they are part of respective community (LWF 2009: 20). Along this, each member of the community is obliged to tell his/her stories, as well as hearing others' stories. (LWF 2009: 8, 9,13-14,49). Diakonia is an arena for rendering God's ministry to humans, according to the New Testament witness. It is the "continuation" of the celebration of Holy Communion that announces God's unconditional love in Christ (LWF 2009: 24-25). Its mandatory roots lie in the incarnate God, who came and lived in this world, "not to be served but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). However, Jesus is not only the model for humanity, but also for how to serve it by being involved in diaconal works, thus testifying God's love for all humankind (LWF 2009 :24-25). Without such involvement neither the church nor her identity could take place; because these come naturally as the fruit of both koinonia and diakonia. At this juncture, diakonia invites all Christians irrespective their denominational affiliations to respond to the call of being a neighbor resp. being Christ-like to fellow human beings. The understanding of the priesthood of all believers in the Lutheran tradition could also be reformulated as the diakonia of all believers to which all baptized are called and equipped, regardless of their apparent status or social conditions LWF 2009: 27).

Further reading:

- Kjell Nordstokke, "The Church and the Public Space. A Lutheran Interpretation", in: A. Burghardt (ed.), *Liberated by God's Grace*, Lutheran World Federation, Evangelische Verlagsanstalt GmbH, Leipzig, 2015, pp.27-40: https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/dtpw-2017_booklet_liberated_by_gods_grace-low.pdf
- Martin Luther, "Ordinance of a Common Chest, Preface, 1523", in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 45, Muhlenberg Press, Philadelphia, 1962, pp. 159-175
- Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian, 1520", in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 31, Muhlenberg Press, Philadelphia, 1957, pp. 327-378

- Kjell Nordstokke (ed.), *Diakonia in Context. Transformation. Reconciliation. Empowerment*, Lutheran World Federation, Geneva, 2009:
<https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/DMD-Diakonia-EN-low.pdf>

Questions for reflection:

1. Are faith (according to Paul and Luther), and good works (according to James and Luther), contradictory or complementary? Discuss.
2. A Christian is required to live both vertical and horizontal relations with God and fellow humans. How does such kind of life relate to Christian faith and diakonia? Explain.
3. According to Dr Martin Luther and his fellow reformers, *Salvation is not for sale!* Discuss in the light of biblical texts to support your arguments.