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HIST 4230: Age of the Reformations

Roman Catholic and Protestant Understandings of Works

One of the great controversies between Roman Catholics and Protestants since the beginning of the Protestant Reformation has been around the place and function of works in the lives of Christians. Some Roman Catholics have held that Protestantism leads to an antinomian lifestyle—and not without reason, when one remembers the city of Münster. However, Protestants have contended that they hold no such view, but that true faith inevitably leads to good works. Although such a topic cannot be covered comprehensively, a close study of John Winthrop's *A Model of Christian Charity* and Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ* will shed some light on this discussion. Such a study will not only yield insight into distinctions between Protestants and Roman Catholics, but will demonstrate that Protestants do not hold to antinomianism, nor can they do so consistently.

The essential difference between the Roman Catholic and Protestant view of the place and function of works in the Christian life lies in two statements from two different men. The first, from Thomas à Kempis, is taken from his *Imitation of Christ*, “it is a good life which maketh a man dear to God.”¹ John Winthrop speaks instead of a “new birth” that produces “love to God and our brother.”² Although the differences seem minute, they are part of the fundamental distinction between Roman Catholics and Protestants, and part of what created the Protestant Reformation.

¹ Thomas à Kempis, “Imitation of Christ,” c. 1418–1427, p. 3.

² John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity,” c. 1630, p. 269.

Kempis' statement reveals a profound view of the Christian faith—when he says, “a good life. . . maketh a man dear to God,” he is saying that by good works a man earns favor with God.³ This statement is not the only one of its nature in Kempis' work. For instance, “a pure conscience giveth great confidence towards God,” and “a lowly knowledge of thyself is a surer way to God” indicate that it is a man's doings that draw him near to God, rather than the other way around.⁴

In contrast, throughout his speech, John Winthrop speaks of “Christ [coming to take] possession of the soul” and afterward “exercising his graces in [the regenerate].”⁵ Winthrop's statements intimate that it is first the act of God to “take possession of the soul,” or, in other words, to “regenerate” (or, to give new life to) the soul—after this “new birth” comes the “love to God and our brother” which produces good works.⁶ In addition to this belief that the new birth precedes works, Winthrop establishes the fact that “there is. . . a double Law by which we are regulated in our conversation one towards another: . . . the law of nature and the law of grace.”⁷

With such convictions, Winthrop evinces a system of belief that does not allow for antinomianism. In other words, Protestantism teaches that, through the new birth, God produces a new heart with “love to God and our brother,” so that he no longer “[loves] and [seeks] himself

³ Kempis, “Imitation,” p. 3.

⁴ Kempis, “Imitation,” pp. 4, 5.

⁵ Winthrop, “Model,” pp. 262, 269.

⁶ Winthrop, “Model,” pp. 262, 269.

⁷ Winthrop, “Model,” pp. 262–263

only,” but now, according to “the Law of Grace” he even “[loves his] enemies and [does] good to them that hate [him].”⁸

Consequently, the essential difference between Protestants and Roman Catholics does not lie in law versus no law. Rather, the chief distinguishing element lies in whether men “[make themselves] dear to God” or whether God first conquers the heart and works a new birth.⁹ These defining distinctions are vital to take note of in discussions between Protestants and Roman Catholics, because not only do they characterize the Church, but they enable clear and thorough conversation which—one hopes—will produce more light than heat.

⁸ Winthrop, “Model,” p. 263.

⁹ Kempis, “Imitation,” p. 3.