

The ‘Doctrine’ of Workmanship

One of the glories of Christianity is the assurance that “we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do”(Ephesians 2:10). This statement by Paul that we are “created” does not simply refer to our physical formation, as God has, of course, created all human beings (see Genesis 1:26-27). Rather, Paul is talking about being “created in Christ.” It means that every person who believes in Christ does so because she or he is the object of a process of God’s “spiritual creation.” The word workmanship is very important; it is the Greek word *poema* from which we get our word “poem.” It means that every believer is essentially a work of art — God’s art! Consider how artists work, whether they are writers, musicians, painters, sculptors, etc. They labor long and hard and with the utmost care and detailed attention. Sometimes they do very little, only a stroke here or there. Other times they make massive changes. But always they seek to bring the raw material into line with an artistic vision. Thus Paul is telling us that God labors over all believers throughout our entire lives, intervening and guiding and shaping us to bring us into line with a vision he has for us. This is mentioned also in Ephesians 2:10 — “created to... good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” Thus, God has a particular set of “good works” for us to do, for which he prepares us our whole lives.

Looking at our Lives

It is therefore of utmost importance to look back on our lives and see everything that has happened through this grid, namely that:

•**God has been at work through the various influences of our lives**— “created in Christ.” All of our experiences and troubles and our family and friends must be seen as the instruments of an artist used to mold and shape us. He has been at work all of our lives!

•**God has been at work to make us something beautiful** — “workmanship.” God is out to make our beings something great—to give us characters of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, integrity, humility and self-control.

•**God has been at work to make us something useful** — “good works... prepared before hand.” God is also out to make our doings something great — to make us helpful and able to serve others in special ways.

Paul uses this “doctrine of workmanship” like a pair of spectacles through which to view his entire life. In Galatians 1:13-23, he shows us that he now sees God at work throughout his whole life (“God, who set me apart from birth and called me,”v.15).

Secondly, he now sees that God used the gospel to make him something beautiful. He had been a fanatically intense person who felt superior in his self-righteousness and only criticized others (“intensely I persecuted... extremely zealous for the traditions,”v.14). But God humbled him and showed him he was nothing apart from undeserved grace (“called me by his grace and was pleased to reveal his Son in me”) so that now he loves to lead people to praise and thanks (“they praised God because of me,”v.24).

Thirdly, he realizes that though his obsessive study of the Bible and theology (“the traditions”) was originally motivated by self-righteousness and the need to feel

superior, he was now, as a Christian, uniquely equipped to be a preacher, teacher and evangelist (“so that I might preach him among the Gentiles”). His scholarship and knowledge of the Bible enabled him to bridge the gap between Christianity and various pagan philosophies and religions.

Re-examining your life

Let’s take time to look back at your own life, using three questions based on the three aspects of Paul’s teaching. Take several minutes to individually answer each of the questions below. Share your answers with a friend.

1. As you look back on your life, how can you see that God was working, even though you didn’t know it at the time:
 - a. To protect you?
 - b. To wake you up to things you denied?
 - c. To show you weaknesses or flaws in yourself?
 - d. To show you your value to him?

Note: There may be some overlap between these categories. i.e., God may have worked to wake you up (b) to a particular flaw in yourself (c)

2. How did God help you to see that salvation was by grace, not good works? Or how has he been doing so? (You may still be in process!)

3. What practical difference in your character has God made with his grace? (In other words, in what way would you be a fundamentally different personality had God not shown you his love?)

4. How has God prepared you to be of service and help to others? What has he equipped you to do in service to God, your loved ones, your neighbors?