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Faith Without Works is Dead: An Evangelical Meditation on Mother Teresa

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“But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?” With those words the Apostle James declared war on the theological fiction that intellectual assent to orthodox doctrine is the sum total of the Christian faith. And yet, the place and priority of good works in the Christian life remains a vexing issue for believers- and a fierce issue of debate among the theologians.

The death of Mother Teresa of Calcutta brings this issue unavoidably to light. The remarkable nun had achieved world-wide recognition for her work among those she identified as “the poorest of the poor,” and that recognition was richly deserved.

Taking over a former temple to Kali-the Hindu goddess of death and destruction-Mother Teresa and her Sisters of Charity took in the sick, the dying, and the destitute. Her mission became known as a refuge for those who had no refuge. The dying received care in the name of Jesus Christ, and their bodies were washed and tended. Asked if she feared death, Mother Teresa replied, “No, I see it all the time.”

Visitors to her mission were quickly handed a bowl of food to feed to an abandoned infant, or a basin for washing a dying beggar. She would be interviewed while constantly at work, and her face gave ample evidence of her hours of loving labor.

An Albanian by birth, Mother Teresa was already a nun when in 1946 she received “a call within a call” and heard God calling her to found a new religious order dedicated to tending the abandoned of Calcutta. Pressed by the little nun (she was less than five feet tall), the Vatican relented and established her order. Taking the motto, “Let every action of mine be something beautiful for God,” Mother Teresa and twelve sisters started the order and its work.

Fame came through a television documentary by Malcolm Muggeridge, the British journalist. Shortly thereafter, Mother Teresa would be famous, and Malcolm Muggeridge, forever touched by her example, would convert to Catholicism. In a book based upon his documentary of the same title, *Something Beautiful for God*, Muggeridge wrote that Mother Teresa could “hear in the cry of every abandoned child the cry of the Bethlehem child; recognize in every leper’s stumps the hands which once touched sightless eyes and made them see.”

Later years would bring awards including the 1979 Nobel Peace Prize, and honorary degrees from universities including Harvard-not previously known for honoring nuns. (Speaking to Harvard graduates on the eve of their commencement, she instructed them on the virtue of sexual chastity. Her instructions were bold, and almost certainly too late.) Her sense of calling was as concentrated as a laser beam, and she was equally capable of creating heat or light. She declined the customary Nobel award banquet and asked that the money be sent to her mission. When Pope Paul VI gave her a limousine, she sold it with dispatch and started a new charity project.

Her courageous stand against the enemies of life won her hatred as well as notoriety. Living through the central decades of what historian John Lukacs calls “the bloody twentieth century,” Mother Teresa contended for the sanctity of life on the streets, and in the womb.

Standing to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, she aimed her words at the enemies of the unborn: "To me the nations with legalized abortion are the poorest nations. The greatest destroyer of peace today is the crime against the unborn child." This was, we can be certain, not what the Swedish Academy had in mind.

Her boldest stand was taken in Washington, D.C., where in 1994 Mother Teresa addressed the National Prayer Breakfast. The sari-clad nun declared that abortion is "a war against the child, a direct killing of the innocent child, murder by the mother herself." The mother and the father are both complicit in this murderous act. "By abortion, the mother does not learn to live, but kills even her own child to solve her problems, And, by abortion, the father is told that he does not have to take any responsibility at all for the child he has brought into the world. That father is likely to put other women into the same trouble. So abortion just leads to more abortion."

Turning political correctness on its head, she refused to retreat into speaking of those involved in abortion as merely women and men-she called them mothers and fathers, exhibiting a moral honesty and courage rarely seen in this age of moral timidity. But her most courageous words were still to come. Standing before over 4,000 of Washington's most powerful officials-including President and Mrs. Clinton-she softly but sternly pled: "Please don't kill the child. I want the child. Please give me the child. I am willing to accept any child who would be aborted and to give that child to a married couple who will love the child and be loved by the child."

Such moral courage is rare in Washington, or in any other modern city. Mother Teresa was not making a hypothetical offer-her children's home in Calcutta claims to have saved over 3,000 children from abortion.

Mother Teresa seemed unable to understand how Americans could be so morally debased. In an amicus brief filed with the Supreme Court, she attacked the infamous Roe v. Wade decision which legalized abortion. "It was a sad infidelity to America's highest ideals when this Court said that it did not matter, or could not be determined, when the inalienable right to life began for a child in its mother's womb." In yet another context, she simply asked, "If a mother can kill her own child, then what is left of the West to be destroyed?"

Her moral clarity earned her enemies. In 1994 she was attacked for her pro-life convictions in a British television production wickedly entitled Hell's Angel. Her order accepted financial support from the rich, the famous, and the scandalous. When she was criticized for accepting money from unsavory business and political leaders, she replied that she had no right to refuse money which could go to the poor.

The political left rejected her hands-on ministry as quaint, if not dangerous, and attacked her for not addressing "the root causes of poverty" in capitalism, multinational corporations, and other economic patterns. Mother Teresa kept washing bodies and saving babies.

She was famous for her good works. This is a challenge to evangelical understanding. Did she trust in her good works for her salvation? Roman Catholic doctrine holds, not only that faith without works is dead, but that our good works cooperate with grace. Evangelicals rightly reject this as the very works righteousness the Apostle Paul so eloquently-and conclusively-rejected. Salvation is entirely by grace through faith, and completely apart from works.

And yet, good works subsequent to salvation are evidence of genuine faith. But even these works are enabled by the grace of God working through those He has regenerated. This is completely missed by the media, and by the pundits of popular culture. One reporter on National Public Radio said that Mother Teresa was "the Word made flesh."

Our Lord commanded that we let our light shine before others "that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." For the Christian, the purpose of works is not to bring attention to ourselves as good, but to point to God, who alone is good.

Did Mother Teresa know this? Was her faith in Christ, and in Christ alone? Representatives of at least six non-Christian religions participated in Mother Teresa's state funeral in India. Was she clear that Jesus Christ is the only Savior, and that salvation is found in His name, and in His name alone?

The answers to these questions are, for now, known only to God. The issue before evangelicals is this: Do we have what it takes to produce a Mother Teresa? Do we have the courage, the concern, and the love for "the least of these" required for such a ministry? Have we grown spiritually blind and deaf to the "untouchables" around us?

Where are the evangelical orders of committed evangelist/caregivers, who will take up a ministry to those like the destitute and dying of Calcutta? Our credibility before the watching world is at stake, and in question.

Those who know that salvation is purely by grace through faith, and that we have nothing to claim but the shed blood of Jesus Christ also know that, on the basis of that same biblical revelation, we are told to minister in Christ's name. The danger is always that we will either trust in our works for our salvation, or deny the importance of works after our salvation.

We should remember the instruction of Augustine, the great theologian of the early church, who reminds us that good works "are the consequences rather than the precedents of grace. Thus, no man is to suppose that he has received grace because he has done good works but rather that he would not have been able to do those good works if he had not, through faith, received grace."

As we reflect upon the death of Mother Teresa, may we glorify God for her good works and take courage from her example as a defender of the unborn and the despised. May we preach the gospel of grace, and may the evidence of that grace be so abundant that God is glorified. As this murderous and immoral century comes to a close, may evangelical Christians bear witness to both the grace and the goodness of God, and may God do something beautiful through us.

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