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Errata

There is an error on page 79 in the article by Nathan Rinne, “Paradise Regained: Placing Nicholas Hopman’s *Lex Aeterna* Back in Luther’s Frame,” *CTQ* 82 (2018). The last sentence of the second paragraph should read, “Even if they are born of a spontaneous love, the good intentions and works that characterize the ‘new man’ can be of a very impure love, still tainted by sin, even as that sin is covered by Christ’s blood.”

The Editors

Salvation by God’s Grace, Judgment According to Our Works: Taking a Look at Matthew and Paul

Timo Laato¹

I. Introduction

How are you saved? By God’s grace, no doubt! That is the right answer. Yet, the Scriptures tell us that judgment will take place according to our works. Most Christians do not want to think about judgment according to works. One renowned New Testament scholar only adds to the problem as he states, “Nowhere in the Biblical material does one find judgment according to grace or faith.”² Also George Stöckhardt, a trustworthy representative of nineteenth-century confessional Lutherans, dares to claim, “The works of men appear throughout Scripture as the actual norm of the judgment.”³ Approximately three-fourths of Paul’s judgment sayings refer to the judgment of Christians!⁴ He wanted to alert them to the risks of their living. Did they always take his warnings seriously? Do we?

Many attempts have been made to reconcile the emphasis on salvation by God’s grace and the thought of judgment according to works within a single system of dogmatics. A number of academics at the turn of the twentieth century drew the conclusion that the idea of judgment according to works is a Jewish or early Christian relic that has no value.⁵ Currently, many scholars regard the notion of judgment according to works simply as a contradiction in New Testament theology that must be allowed to stand.⁶ A fairly modern way of solving the problem is to understand the motif of judgment and recompense exclusively as a rhetorical

¹ This article is dedicated to Christopher Barnekov, an incarnation of a real gentleman who makes God’s mercy visible through his hospitality, in appreciation of his involvement in Scandinavian Confessional Lutheranism.

² Klyne R. Snodgrass, “Justification by Grace—to the Doers: an Analysis of the Place of Romans 2 in the Theology of Paul,” *New Testament Studies* 32 (1986): 78.

³ George Stöckhardt, *Romans*, trans. Edward W. Schade, ed. Otto F. Stahlke (St. Louis: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1984), 83.

⁴ Snodgrass, “Justification by Grace,” 93n101 in reference to H. Braun, *Gerichtsgedanke und Rechtfertigungslehre bei Paulus* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1930).

⁵ For a list of scholars, see Nigel M. Watson, “Justified by Faith, Judged by Works—An Antinomy?” *New Testament Studies* 29 (1983): 220n8.

⁶ For a list of scholars, see Snodgrass, “Justification by Grace,” 88n12.

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device, as a tool of the overall argument.⁷ Indeed, it seems that more time has been spent explaining away the judgment according to works than explaining what it means.

In truth, the New Testament authors have transmitted both the emphasis on salvation by God's grace and the dramatic vision of the last judgment according to human works. There is never any indication that they perceived a problem. Far more, they have made the outwardly controversial utterances their own and integrated them into their theology. Thus, any explanation can be judged by answering the question "What does the explanation do with the pieces that do not fit?" The pieces that do not appear to fit are telling signs of the inadequacy of the whole reasoning. When some theological aspects have been omitted, other components of the theory are stretched and overloaded. As a result, grievous distortions emerge, because the overall doctrinal system is thrown off balance.⁸

The Lutheran Confessions thoroughly discuss the biblical teaching on judgment according to works. Maybe the most comprehensive passage is Apology IV 370–373:

Our opponents urge that good works properly merit eternal life, since Paul says (Rom. 2:6), "He will render to every man according to his works"; and v. 10, "Glory and honor and peace for every one who does good." John 5:29, "Those who have done good will come forth to the resurrection of life"; Matt. 25:35, "I was hungry and you gave me food," etc. These passages and all others like them where works are praised in the Scriptures must be taken to mean not only outward works but also the faith of the heart, since the Scriptures do not speak of hypocrisy but of righteousness in the heart and of its fruits. Whenever law and works are mentioned, we must know that Christ, the mediator, should not be excluded. He is the end of the law (Rom. 10:4), and he himself says, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). By this rule, as we have said earlier, all passages on works can be interpreted. Therefore, when eternal life is granted to works, it is granted to the justified. None can do good works except the justified, who are led by the Spirit of Christ; nor can good works please God without the mediator Christ and faith, according to Heb. 11:6, "Without faith it is impossible to please God." When Paul says, "He will render to every man according to his works," we must understand not merely outward works but the entire righteousness or unrighteousness. That is to say, "Glory for him who does good," namely, for the righteous man. "You gave me food" is cited as fruit

⁷ Ernst Synofzik, *Die Gerichts- und Vergeltungsaussagen bei Paulus. Eine traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977).

⁸ Snodgrass, "Justification by Grace," 72.

and evidence of the righteousness of the heart and of faith, and for this reason eternal life is granted to righteousness.”⁹

As shown in the beginning of the quotation, Melancthon primarily or explicitly refers to three chapters in the New Testament (viz. Matt 25; John 5; and Rom 2) as the biblical foundation for the judgment according to works. Two of those (viz. Matt 25 and Rom 2) are recounted toward the end of the quotation but without being specified as quotations from Scripture. They are the central texts that most of all need to be explained. At the same time, the emphasis on salvation by grace prevails beyond any reasonable doubt.

The task here—within the limits of a short article—is to examine the biblical teaching on judgment according to works especially in relation to the thought of salvation by grace. The focus lies on those two texts that are of primary importance in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (see above): Matthew 25 (in particular, vv. 31–46) and Romans 2 (in particular, vv. 6–11). Other relevant passages must be discussed in another context and at another time. Doing everything here and now seems next to impossible.

II. Matthew 25:31–46

The idea of judgment according to works occurs in the Gospel of Matthew. To quote Matthew 16:27, one of the most relevant passages: “For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done”¹⁰ (καὶ τότε ἀποδώσει ἕκαστῳ κατὰ τὴν πρᾶξιν αὐτοῦ). Much later, Matthew 25:31–46 uncovers in depth how exactly the last judgment is going to happen. All the facts and features in the passage will not be discussed below. The focus lies on the relationship between God’s grace and human efforts. Many details in the text, primarily in verse 34, reveal that in no way do the righteous earn their place in the heavenly kingdom through their works.¹¹

⁹ Quotations from the Lutheran Confessions are from Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959). See also Ap IV 252.

¹⁰ This and subsequent Scripture quotations marked ESV are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. All other Scripture translations are my own.

¹¹ The points made here are my own reflections on Matt 25:31–46 in light of several commentaries and special studies. This whole section goes back to my more comprehensive article, “Rättfärdighet i Bergspredikan mot bakgrunden av hela Matteusevangeliet,” in *Reformatio vai restauratio – tradition aarteita ja tulkinnan kompastuskiviä*, Iustitia, eds. T. Eskola and J. Rankinen (Helsinki, Finland: Suomen Teologinen Instituutti, 2017), 190–213. It has been translated into English by B. Ericsson and is used by permission.

First, good deeds are not what made the righteous into “sheep.” Rather, the righteous were first incorporated as members of God’s flock, and afterward they showed love to their fellow man. Second, the righteous are expressly said to be “blessed by my Father” (Matt 25:34, ESV). The substantive verb οἱ εὐλογημένοι (perf. part.) emphasizes a permanent state that points back to the Father’s favor. The good deeds do not proceed as the basis for his benevolence. Third, the expression “inherit” (κληρονομήσατε) means that the righteous really inherit the kingdom of God. They do not take possession of it in any other way, but receive it only as an inheritance, on account of a birthright. Fourth, the kingdom of heaven has been “prepared (ἡτοιμασμένην, perf. part.) for you from the foundation of the world” (ESV). Thus, it cannot be acquired with the help of good works afterward. Fifth, before Jesus (the Son of Man) lists the good deeds of the righteous, he emphasizes the eternal election as the basis for the whole of salvation and the Christian life. Sixth, the righteous themselves do not begin to list their good works in order to thereby demand reward. Seventh, in addition, the righteous are surprised by all the good that they have done. Apparently, their salvation is not based on what they have accomplished. Eighth, the righteous shall be judged according to what they “have done for one of the least of these, my brothers” (Matt 25:40). Their failures, omissions, and shortcomings are not even mentioned. What grace! On the contrary, the unrighteous will be judged in accordance with what they have not done for one of the least of these; whatever they at times perhaps tried to do escapes any notice. See Matthew 25:40 and 25:45. Ninth, the sentence is announced on the basis of deeds of *love*, but not, strictly speaking, on different deeds of *the law* (cf. 1 Cor 13 and the Epistle of James in its entirety). These do not assume communion with Christ as the basis and content of salvation. Tenth, in contrast to the righteous who are called those “who are blessed by my Father” (see second point), those who are lost are called “you cursed” (Matt 25:41, ESV). The difference in the manner of formulation awakens the impression that the latter bear responsibility for their perdition (particularly because according to Matt 25:41, the eternal condemnation was originally prepared only for the devil and his angels), while the former thank God for his final salvation.

In light of these ten points, the kingdom of heaven shows itself to be an invaluable gift that cannot be earned by human accomplishments. What place, then, do good works occupy according to which the judgment nevertheless occurs? Such a question still demands an answer. To this end, a short summary of a theological discussion that goes back to the time of the Reformation will follow. The purpose is not to use an anachronistic *a priori* understanding in the exposition of Matthew’s Gospel, but rather to provide a broader and better perspective on different and alternative interpretations.

A powerful theological debate was stoked into flames among Lutherans already in the 1550s concerning the importance of good works in the question of who would finally be saved. In particular, Georg Major emphasized that good works are necessary for salvation. Among those who opposed him, Nicolaus von Amsdorf held that good works are harmful for salvation. Both extreme positions were rejected. The Lutheran fathers stressed, in order to highlight their well-balanced point of view for pedagogical purposes quite simply, that good works are necessary, namely as unavoidable consequences of faith, but have no part in actual salvation.¹² In total, there were three different alternatives in the charged debate. First, good works are necessary for salvation. Second, good works are harmful for salvation. Third, good works are necessary (assuming that one rightly understands what this short sentence means).

Against the background of the former “Majoristic Controversy,” a more nuanced interpretive horizon regarding Matthew 25:31–46 opens up. Apart from the second alternative, which is of course eliminated, the passage is sometimes interpreted in agreement with the first alternative, as if good works are necessary for salvation. However, such an idea appears unfathomable in light of the ten points that attribute the glory of salvation to God (see above). Instead, the text shall be summarized in conformity with the third alternative: good works are necessary. Full stop! The sentence cannot be expanded anymore.

There is, in fact, a decisive difference between the sentences “Good works are necessary for salvation” and “Good works are necessary” as they relate to the exposition of Matthew 25:31–46. In the former case, salvation depends, in the end, on human accomplishments, despite praising the Messiah as the Savior. In the latter case, however, the whole of salvation depends on God’s grace, which the Messiah mediates. In communion with him, his grace provides love for all. It is just such a vision that Matthew 25:31–46 depicts when the final judgment is painted there.

III. Romans 2:6–11

In Romans, the first explicit quotation from the Old Testament Scriptures is found in 1:17, where the apostle refers to Habakkuk 2:4; and the second is found in Romans 2:6, where he refers to Proverbs 24:12 as well as MT Psalm 62:12 (resp. LXX 61:12). In the former case, he underscores his teaching on salvation through faith by grace; and in the latter case, he underlines his thought of judgment according to works. Taken together, both quotations confirm the thesis of this

¹² See FC IV.

article, that is, that salvation is by God's grace but judgment occurs according to human works.

It is worth noting that in Pauline theology, good works or the fruit of the Spirit do not amount to the *conditio sine qua non* of salvation. It depends, from beginning to end, on faith alone (Rom 1:17; 11:20–23; 2 Cor 1:24; 13:5–7; the whole Epistle to the Galatians, primarily 2:20). Good works do not at all effect remaining in Christ. They rather show that one has entered communion with him through faith. Nevertheless, Paul, at the same time, maintains that judgment occurs according to human deeds or that heinous sins results in the loss of salvation (see esp. Rom 2:6–13; 6:15–23; 8:12–13; 11:22; 14:10; 1 Cor 3:10–13; 4:2–5; 5:1–5; 6:9–10; 10:1–13; 2 Cor 5:10; Gal 5:19–21).¹³ Thus, the question still remains as to whether his emphasis competes with his teaching on *iustificatio sola gratia per fidem propter Christum*.¹⁴

In the debate that here follows, the main focus lies—as already stated in the introduction—primarily on Romans 2 and especially on verses 6–11. To begin with, the passage is to be interpreted in the light of context. The polemics in Romans 1–2 obviously recalls the Wisdom of Solomon. The points of contact are manifold. In Romans 1, six points of agreement with Wisdom of Solomon are present. First, creation bears witness to the Creator (Rom 1:19–20; Wis 13:1–19). Second, idolatry is based on pure folly (Rom 1:21–23, 25; Wis 13–15). Third, idolatry leads to lewdness (Rom 1:24–28; Wis 14:12). Fourth, Gentiles make themselves guilty of gross sins (Rom 1:21–32; Wis 14:23–31). Fifth, Gentiles are without excuse (Rom 1:20; Wis 13:8). Sixth, God passes righteous judgment (Rom 1:32; Wis 12:13).

From the opening of the second chapter, however, the polemical tone suddenly turns against the argument found in Wisdom of Solomon. The contrast runs through especially Romans 2:1–6. Wisdom of Solomon affirms the judgment of God over the Gentiles. Because of their upsetting idolatry and every kind of vices, they are with full justice forever damned (chs. 11–19). Even if the Jews themselves sin, they are nevertheless free from eternal damnation and not hindered from judging others. This astonishing line of reasoning goes back to four principal presuppositions in Wisdom of Solomon.

¹³ However, see Judith M. Gundry Volf, *Paul and Perseverance: Staying In and Falling Away* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1990), 83–154. She draws the conclusion that “Paul does not think Christians’ ethical failure results in exclusion from final salvation” (157). Her thesis needs, in my opinion, no refutation. Yet, see Heikki Räisänen, *Paul and the Law* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1983), 185–186n116.

¹⁴ See my own discussion: Timo Laato, *Paulus und das Judentum: Anthropologische Erwägungen* (Åbo: Åbo Akademis Förlag, 1991), 199–204; and Timo Laato, *Paul and Judaism: An Anthropological Approach*, trans. T. McElwain, South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism 115 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 158–162.

First, God's wrath falls exclusively on the Gentiles: "For when they were tried, albeit but in mercy chastened, they learned how the ungodly were tormented, being judged with wrath: For these, as a father, admonishing them, thou didst prove; But those, as a stern king, condemning them, thou didst search out" (Wis 11:9–10).¹⁵ Second, the Jews escape God's wrath because of their knowledge of him and his mercy: "But thou, our God, art gracious (*χρηστός*) and true, longsuffering (*μακρόθυμος*), and in mercy ordering all things. For even if we sin, we are thine, knowing thy dominion; But we shall not sin, knowing that we are accounted thine; For to know thee is perfect righteousness, Yea, to know thy dominion is the root of immortality" (Wis 15:1–3). Third, God in his wrath has patience in order to give the Gentiles a chance to repent: "But thou hast mercy on all men, because thou hast power to do all things, and thou overlookest the sins of men to the end they may repent (*εἰς μετάνοιαν*)" (Wis 11:23; cf. 12:10–11). Fourth, the Jews should bear in mind the goodness and patience of God in their judging: "While therefore thou dost chasten us, thou scourgest our enemies ten thousand times more, to the intent that we may ponder thy goodness when we judge (*κρίνοντες*), and when we are judged may look for mercy" (Wis 12:22).¹⁶

In Romans 2, Paul takes on the task of correcting these false presuppositions of Wisdom of Solomon. He strives to overthrow the Jewish egocentric self-arrogance. In view of verses 1–3, no one has the slightest right to judge his fellow man if he commits the same sins himself. Therefore, in contrast to Wisdom of Solomon, the apostle brings out the following contrasting points in Romans. First, God's wrath falls also on the Jews: "Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God?" (Rom 2:3, ESV). Second, the knowledge of God and his mercy rather increases the guilt of the Jews: "Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness (*τῆς χρηστότητος*) and forbearance and patience (*τῆς μακροθυμίας*) . . . ?" (Rom 2:4a, ESV). Third, God in his wrath has patience in order to give also the Jews a chance to repent: ". . . not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead *you* to repentance (*εἰς μετάνοιαν*)?" (Rom 2:4b, ESV, emphasis added). Fourth, in their judging, the Jews should bear in mind the justice and impartiality of God, in other words, ultimately his frightful judgment of them: "But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. He will render to each one according to his works" (Rom 2:5–6, ESV; cf. vv. 7–11).

¹⁵ Translations of the Wisdom of Solomon are from *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, ed. R. H. Charles (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913).

¹⁶ For the line of reasoning in Wisdom of Solomon, see Anders Nygren, *Pauli brev till romarna*, vol. 6 of *Tolkning av Nya Testamentet* (Stockholm: SKD's bokforlag, 1979), 120–121.

Lexical similarities between Wisdom of Solomon and Romans 1:18–2:5 strengthen the conclusion that the latter passage relates to the former text.¹⁷ This being the case, Paul already in Romans 2:1 embarks on an earnest debate with the Jews. Because he explicitly addresses mankind (Rom 2:1, 3), he is hardly discussing this matter with merely the Jews. Rather, they are types representing those (e.g., the Gentile moral philosophers or followers of rigorous religions) who raise themselves above others to judge them. Paul knows well enough that at least some Gentiles, to say nothing of Jews, do not consider themselves the same as wicked heathens (Rom 1:18–32). Only after several further accusations (Rom 2:1–29), he sets up the whole world as *massa perditionis* (Rom 3:9–18).

The argument in Romans 2:12–13 is inextricably linked to the overall reasoning in Romans 1–2. All those “who sin apart from the law” designate the Gentiles (Rom 1:18–32), whereas all those “who sin under the law” denote the Jews (Rom 2:1–5), representing not the common (decadent) people but the better ones. Then, Romans 2:14–16 once again draws on the Gentiles who “do not have the law” (ESV), whereas Romans 2:17–24, in turn, moves to the Jews who “rely on the law” (ESV). Finally, the mention of the law implies the subject of the circumcision, which involves the question of being circumcised or not (Rom 2:25–27) and the discussion of having the circumcision either “in flesh” or “in Spirit” (Rom 2:28–29). In this zigzag manner, the flow of the argument goes on in Romans 2.

But what about Romans 2:6–11? What is the function and meaning of the verses in the overall context? The structure of the passage contains a clear-cut chiasm. Both Romans 2:7 and 2:10 speak of those who do and receive good, whereas Romans 2:8 and 2:9 are the intervening verses that speak of those who do and receive evil. Besides, Romans 2:6 and 2:11 assert that God shows no partiality.¹⁸ Hence, Romans 2:7–10 is inserted or sandwiched between the two assertions in 2:6 and 2:11, which focus on God’s righteous verdict at the last judgment. For sure, he will have the final say (cf. Rom 1:32).¹⁹ On the whole, the chiastic arrangement of Romans 2:6–11 looks like this:

¹⁷ Laato, *Paulus und das Judentum*, 199–204; and Laato, *Paul and Judaism*, 94–95.

¹⁸ Michael P. Middendorf, *Romans 1–8*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013), 162–163, in unison with most commentaries. See also Snodgrass, “Justification by Grace,” 80.

¹⁹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 136.

- A 2:6 δὲ ἀποδώσει ἐκάστῳ κατὰ τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ
- B 2:7 τοῖς μὲν καθ' ὑπομονὴν ἔργου ἀγαθοῦ
- C δόξαν καὶ τιμὴν καὶ ἀφθαρσίαν ζητοῦσιν ζωὴν αἰώνιον,
- D 2:8 τοῖς δὲ ἐξ ἐριθείας καὶ ἀπειθοῦσι τῇ ἀληθείᾳ πειθόμενοι δὲ τῇ ἀδικίᾳ
- E ὀργὴ καὶ θυμὸς.
- E' 2:9 θλίψις καὶ στενοχωρία
- D' ἐπὶ πᾶσαν ψυχὴν ἀνθρώπου τοῦ κατεργαζομένου τὸ κακόν, . . .
- C' 2:10 δόξα δὲ καὶ τιμὴ καὶ εἰρήνη παντὶ
- B' τῷ ἐργαζομένῳ τὸ ἀγαθόν, . . .
- A' 2:11 οὐ γάρ ἐστιν προσωποληψία παρὰ τῷ θεῷ.
- A 2:6 “ . . . who will give back to each one according to his works.”
- B 2:7 On the one hand, to those who, according to the endurance in good work,
- C seek glory and honor and incorruptibility, [he will give] eternal life.
- D 2:8 On the other hand, to those who, out of self-centeredness, are unpersuaded by the truth, but are persuaded by the unrighteousness,
- E [there will be] wrath and fury,
- E' 2:9 tribulation and distress
- D' upon every person of man who works that which is evil, . . .
- C' 2:10 but glory and honor and peace to every person
- B' who works that which is good. . . .
- A' 2:11 For there is no partiality in the presence of God.²⁰

Romans 2:6–11 is often interpreted as no more than a hypothetical possibility, as if it were within reach to obey the law and earn eternal life due to one's own accomplishments. The argument is that only wishful thinking is called for here, since no one will ever achieve what he works toward. So, he builds his castle in the air.²¹ Hence, Romans 2:6–11 “sets forth the biblical conditions for attaining eternal life apart from Christ.”²²

However, there is nothing in Romans 2:6–11 to suggest that the way of thought amounts only to a hypothetical possibility. Indeed, it has every indication of being

²⁰ Middendorf, *Romans 1–8*, 163.

²¹ See Hans Lietzmann, *An die Römer* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1971), 13. For a list of other scholars, see Snodgrass, “Justification by Grace,” 88n9.

²² Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 142.

meant seriously, showing no features of fictive character.²³ At least seven facts show a true and real sense of the passage. First, Romans 2:6 and 2:11 portray a common Pauline notion of judgment according to works. Romans 2:7–10 explains it by speaking of those who do and receive evil or good. The line of reasoning follows a definite chiasmic order, forming a coherent whole (see above). Therefore, either everything or nothing is hypothetical. Certainly, the former case is implausible. Consequently, the latter case is the simple available option. Second, the meaning of Romans 2:7 and 2:10 (speaking of those who do and receive good) is a “pure sham,” if damnation remains the only possibility.²⁴ Third, the idea of judgment according to works is repeated time and again in the Pauline letters without raising any theological complications. If since all those passages are not to be interpreted hypothetically, why should Romans 2:6–11 be understood in that way?²⁵ Fourth, definitely the most natural interpretation is to read the text as it stands, without any preconditions from outside that are laid down in advance. Fifth, also Romans 6:22 suggests the necessity of good works. It speaks of eternal life as being the result or goal of sanctification.²⁶ Yet, 6:23 denies sharply that eternal life can be earned by human accomplishments. Indeed, it is a gift received. On the other hand, death (especially eternal death as the opposite of eternal life) is a wage earned (“provisions” or the pay given to soldiers), a penalty deserved.²⁷ Sixth, likewise Galatians 6:8 views eternal life as a result of “reaping from the Spirit,” after having been “sown to the Spirit.”²⁸ A man reaps what he sows (Gal 6:7). Still, neither when he sows nor when he reaps is he anything, “but only God who gives the growth” (1 Cor 3:7, ESV). Even so, he “will receive his wages according to his labor” (1 Cor 6:8, ESV)! Seventh, the more the Pauline emphasis on judgment according to works is deemphasized, the more the common overall picture of the coming of the Son of Man in the New Testament is torn apart. In that case, the several tensions are not

²³ Pace Middendorf, *Romans 1–8*, 164–169. Correctly, Charles E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1, Introduction and Commentary on Romans I–VIII (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982), 152, states: “But the fact that there is no indication whatsoever in the text that what is being said is hypothetical tells strongly against it.”

²⁴ Snodgrass, “Justification by Grace,” 83: “The words of 2. 7, 10, and 13–15 would be a ‘pure sham’ if judgment were according to works, but damnation were the only possibility.” This is true as to vv. 7 and 10 (but not regarding vv. 13–15; cf. above and see below).

²⁵ Snodgrass, “Justification by Grace,” 74.

²⁶ Snodgrass, “Justification by Grace,” 85; Karl P. Donfried: “Justification and Last Judgement in Paul,” *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 67 (1976): 99–100.

²⁷ Stöckhardt, *Romans*, 83: “It is to be remembered especially that the concept of the norm does not necessarily include the concept of merit. As the Scriptures otherwise testify, e.g., Rom 6:23, the godless with their evil works indeed deserve hell, but contrariwise the devout do not deserve salvation with their good works.”

²⁸ Snodgrass, “Justification by Grace,” 85.

loosened. The bond between Jesus (as demonstrated, e.g., in Matthew) and Paul or the link between James (the brother of Jesus) and Paul is lessened.²⁹

That being said, a further clarification is needed instantly. Rightly, George Stöckhardt pointed out, in reference to Calov, the following: “It is one thing to reward according to works, i.e., according to the testimony of works, which give testimony of interior faith or unbelief; it is another thing to reward on account of works, i.e., on account of the merit of works.”³⁰ As already shown, Melancthon in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession also comes to a similar interpretation. He does not shrink from the literal sense and obvious meaning of the biblical text with the intention of defending his main doctrine on justification by faith more effectively. In truth, he sees here no difficulties at all with his teaching on salvation by grace. Nevertheless, judgment is according to works because the Scriptures say so. That is really Lutheranism at its best!

Moreover, there are nine basics in Pauline theology that should be taken into consideration in this context. They enlighten some important viewpoints in the big picture. First, with exceptional emphasis, Paul argues for the total depravity of the whole humankind. Every person is absolutely corrupt and therefore fully unable to save himself or even contribute to his salvation. So, his only remaining hope lies in the amazing grace of God, which is received for Christ’s sake, by faith alone.³¹ Works that are taken into account at the last judgment do not alter the precondition of the anthropological pessimism (or realism) in Pauline thinking. Second, the new Christian life is brought about by faith, which originates in God’s almighty power by the use of the gospel to the exclusion of any human contribution or cooperation (see, e.g., Rom 1:16; 10:17; 1 Cor 4:15; 2 Cor 4:6).³² Judgment according to works is based on that apostolic insight. Third, strictly speaking, a

²⁹ Snodgrass, “Justification by Grace,” 86.

³⁰ Stöckhardt, *Romans*, 85. See also his interpretation of Rom 2:13 on p. 89: “It is two different matters, whether one says that the doers of the Law, even those persons, are justified, or whether it is said that those concerned are justified for the works’ sake.”

³¹ Laato, *Paulus und das Judentum*, 94–97; and Laato, *Paul and Judaism*, 75–77. Cf. also the very sharp contrast that exists between Rom 2:7–8 and Rom 1:18–32. The three nouns “glory and honor and incorruptibility” (δόξαν και τιμην και ἀφθαρσίαν) in Rom 2:7 without doubt allude to Rom 1:23–24. The Gentiles exchanged “the glory of the incorruptible God” (τὴν δόξαν τοῦ ἀφθάρτου θεοῦ, Rom 1:23) for idolatry. Then, God gave them over “in the desires of their hearts into impurity, to the dishonoring (τοῦ ἀτιμάζεσθαι) of their bodies among themselves” (Rom 1:24). In other words, they do just the opposite of Rom 2:7. As stated in Rom 2:8, there will be “wrath and fury” for those sinners who “are unpersuaded by the truth, but are persuaded by the unrighteousness” (ἀπειθοῦσι τῇ ἀληθείᾳ πειθομένοις δὲ τῇ ἀδικίᾳ). Now the description matches the picture of the Gentiles who suppress “the truth in unrighteousness” (τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἐν ἀδικίᾳ, Rom 1:18). They exchanged “the truth” (τὴν ἀλήθειαν) for a lie (Rom 1:25). See esp. Middendorf, *Romans 1–8*, 166, and other commentaries. Snodgrass, “Justification by Grace,” 80–81, argues in a similar way.

³² Laato, *Paulus und das Judentum*, 190–194; and Laato, *Paul and Judaism*, 150–154.

Christian lives only because Christ lives in him (Gal 2:20). Then it follows that in the deepest sense, Christ does all the good works of the Christian. Alternatively, Paul talks about the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23). In that case, he makes the spiritual life the true source and basis of good works.³³ In and with the rewarding of Christian charity and kindness, God indeed crowns his own toil and labor.³⁴ Fourth, when addressing judgment according to *good* works, Paul prefers talking about judgment according to good work in the singular form. Actually, he speaks of τὰ ἔργα in the plural form only in Romans 2:6, which, as stated above, is a quotation of the Old Testament.³⁵ Straightaway in the next verse, he makes use of the singular καθ' ὑπομονὴν ἔργου ἀγαθοῦ (“the endurance in good work”). The somewhat unexpected expression is to be seen as a collective, summing up the “life work” of a person as a single dominating goal. Maybe it simply denotes “doing good” or “love” as the fulfillment of the law (Rom 13:10; Gal 5:14).³⁶ At least, the singular form ἔργον excludes weighing good deeds against bad or keeping ledger books in view of the last judgment.³⁷ It occurs in a positive sense also in Galatians 6:4 (cf. 1 Cor 3:13).³⁸ Fifth, though good works are never the cause of salvation, it still can be maintained that evil works cause the loss of salvation. Even if the positive (meritorious) statement is not true, the negative one still remains true. Accordingly, they do not exclude each other. That needs to be spelled out clearly. In Romans 6:23, (eternal) death is exposed as “the wages of sin.” On account of a supposed parallelism, eternal life should be exposed as “the wages of sanctification (holiness).” Yet, unexpectedly, it is portrayed as “a gift of God.”³⁹ Similarly, in Romans 2:7, the Greek accusative case of “eternal life” (ζωὴν αἰώνιον) expresses the outcome of God’s gift as the object of the divine recompense (ἀποδώσει) in 2:6. On the contrary, in 2:8, the words for “wrath” and “fury” (ὀργή and θυμός) are nominative: “There will be wrath and fury” (ESV) for all who do wrong and break the rules. They receive the righteous

³³ Laato, *Paulus und das Judentum*, 200–204; and Laato, *Paul and Judaism*, 159–162.

³⁴ See Stöckhardt, *Romans*, 84: “Faith and all the good works of believers are the work and effect of divine grace. God in and with the rewarding of the good works only crowns His own work.”

³⁵ Paul refers to Prov 24:12 as well as to MT Ps 62:12 (LXX 61:12). Evidently, instead of the present tense, he makes use of the future tense (ἀποδώσει), since in v. 5 he pointed out how “you are storing up wrath against yourself” for the last judgment.

³⁶ E.g., Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 137n10. See also Snodgrass, “Justification by Grace,” 84.

³⁷ For a similar view, cf. Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard de Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 273–274 (although he does not deal with Rom 2:6–7).

³⁸ Also in Matt 16:27 (see above), the singular form occurs: καὶ τότε ἀποδώσει ἕκαστῳ κατὰ τὴν πρᾶξιν αὐτοῦ. See as well, e.g., Heb 6:10; 1 Pet 1:17; Rev 22:12.

³⁹ See various commentaries.

judgment that they brought on themselves by their own unrighteous conduct.⁴⁰ Sixth, since salvation is completely by God's grace, it is also by faith alone. In Romans 5:9, justification means salvation from God's wrath on the last day. The expectation of being saved in the future follows directly from having been justified by Christ's blood. Nothing more is needed or required. For certain, so far not even a word has been uttered about the paraenesis that begins as late as in Romans 12. Thus, neither the earnest works of law among Jews nor the good works of charity among Christians add anything to salvation. To repeat: faith alone justifies, but faith never remains alone. It is always active through love (Gal 5:6). Therefore, judgment is according to works.⁴¹ Seventh, as a consequence, good works do not turn faith into a saving *fides viva*. For faith to exercise the saving power, it depends on the proclamation of the gospel (see second point above). God's word generates faith or revives a dead faith. If faith for some reason does not bring forth any good works, then there was no faith at all from the very outset. Good works cannot be annexed to faith. They have to develop or grow from within it. Indeed, they are the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23).⁴² Eighth, instead, good works do increase and strengthen hope. The Greek phrase *ὑπομονὴ ἔργου ἀγαθοῦ* in Romans 2:7 does not stand for “endurance of good work” but, strictly speaking, rather for “endurance or persistence in good work.” That sort of perseverance produces “(a proven) character” (*ὑπομονή*) and (a proven) character, in turn, produces “hope” (*ἐλπίς*), and hope does not “bring shame” at the last judgment (Rom 5:4–5).⁴³ This is the significance of good works in our relationship with God. To be sure, he does not need our good works. But we need them, and our neighbors need them as well. The Pauline insistence on good works enhancing hope instead of faith deserves both attention and reflection in modern ecumenical discussions. It is something that every so often has gone unremarked there.

⁴⁰ Middendorf, *Romans 1–8*, 166. The grammar of 2:7 in itself can be read in two different ways. As a result, there are two alternate translations: (1) “to those who are seeking glory, honor, and immortality [he will render] eternal life”; or (2) “to those who are seeking eternal life [he will render] glory, honor, and immortality.” The syntax strongly favors the first reading. See, e.g., Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 137n9.

⁴¹ As already shown (see above), Rom 2:12–13 takes up the argument in 1:18–2:5 and explains that neither Gentiles nor Jews shall be justified by their own efforts.

⁴² Laato, *Paulus und das Judentum*, 201–202; and Laato, *Paul and Judaism*, 159–161.

⁴³ Heinrich Schlier, *Der Römerbrief* (Freiburg: Herder, 1977), 73: “2 Kor 1,6 ist von der *ὑπομονή τῶν παθημάτων*, von der Geduld im Leiden, 1 Thess 1,3 von der *ὑπομονή τῆς ἐλπίδος*, von der Geduld in der Hoffnung, die Rede. Entsprechend wird hier nicht gemeint sein: ausdauernd gute Werke tun, sondern es wird von dem geduldigen, guten Werk, von dem guten Werk, in dem die Geduld, die ja ein Zeichen und ein Ausweis der Hoffnung ist (vgl. Röm 5,4), wirksam ist, gesprochen.” At least in Pauline letters, the word *ὑπομονή* almost always stands together with (or in the context of) *ἐλπίς*. Cf. Rom 2:7; 5:3; 8:25; 15:4–5; 2 Cor 1:6; 6:4; Col 1:11; 1 Thess 1:3; 2 Thess 1:4; and 3:5.

Ninth and finally, the meaning of “doing” (evil or good) in Romans 2 still has to be specified more exactly. What are the works that will, or may not, prevail at the last judgment? Romans 2:1 affirms that the one who “passes judgment on others is doing the same things” they do. Without doubt, it alludes to the catalog of vices recorded in Romans 1:28–31. The passage encompasses a diversity of sinful acts as well as sinful words and even sinful thoughts. For instance, such iniquities as greed, depravity, envy, malice, slander, defamation, hatred against God, violence, arrogance, inventiveness in commencing and completing austere brutalities, senselessness, faithlessness, lovelessness, and unmercifulness in no case are confined or limited to doing something. Consequently, the list of vices embraces besides “big” offenses also “small” faults, including transgressions that a person does not necessarily *do*. Obviously, Paul uses the verbs *ποιεῖν* (Rom 1:28, 32; 2:3) or *πράσσειν* (Rom 1:32; 2:1–3) without making a clear-cut differentiation between thoughts, words, and acts. On account of his summary usage of speech, people do evil although it sometimes might be “only” a matter of the mouth or mind. Evidently, that way of speaking goes back to Jesus himself (see, e.g., Matt 5:21–30 and Mark 7:20–23). Similar language occurs also in the Septuagint. There are several exhortations to “do the law” (see, e.g., Exod 24:3, 7; Lev 19:37; Deut 5:1, 31–32; 6:1, 24; 28:58; and 31:12), although not every distinct commandment (e.g., to honor God, not to take his name in vain, not to bear false witness against one’s neighbor, or not to covet one’s neighbor’s house) can be fulfilled through good works.⁴⁴ All in all: judgment according to works is also according to words and thoughts.

IV. Summary and Conclusions

Judgment according to works is an integral part of the teaching of Matthew and Paul. For sure, it must not be seen as a contradiction in their theology or an unexpurgated Jewish fragment from their past. What they say, they say in concert with other New Testament authors. The doctrinal statement on judgment according to works does not abrogate the emphasis on salvation by grace. Both aspects stand alongside each other at the same time.

It is simply wrong to regard either Matthew 25:31–46 or Romans 2:6–11 as “merely” preparatory for what comes later in their theology. The thought of judgment according to works is not loosened little by little nor does it disappear completely in the end. On the contrary, in the end, it will prove to be the central legal norm in the court of heaven. Then, all must appear before the judgment seat

⁴⁴ Laato, *Paulus und das Judentum*, 113–115, 157–160, 181–182; and Laato, *Paul and Judaism*, 90–91, 125–127, 143–145.

of God (Rom 14:10) or Christ (2 Cor 5:10) or the Son of Man (Matt 25:31) to receive what they have done, whether good or bad.

Matthew 25:31–46 is sometimes misread and, as a consequence, misunderstood in the light of the guiding principle that good works are necessary for salvation. The passage should be read and rightly understood in the light of another guiding principle that good works are necessary. Between the two readings, there is a tiny but all the more significant difference.

Romans 2:6–11 is not at all hypothetical. It takes for granted the common (Jewish and early Christian) idea of judgment according to works. Then, it underlines the double outcome and underscores the return of deeds to the doer. The chiasmic structure of the text confirms the concise and consistent line of thought. Romans 2:6–11 continues the idea from 2:5 of God’s righteous judgment. Then in 2:12, Paul harks back to his strict accusations against those “who sin apart from the law” (Gentiles) and those “who sin under the law” (Jews), concluding in 2:13 that only those “who obey the law” will be declared righteous. Here it becomes clear—as everywhere in Romans 1:18–3:20—that truly no one is righteous because of works of the law. And yet, there is judgment according to works (not tantamount to works of the law) on the last day!⁴⁵

Apology IV 194–195 is a fitting summary for this article:

Here also we add something concerning rewards and merits. We teach that rewards have been offered and promised to the works of believers. We teach that good works are meritorious, not for the remission of sins, for grace or justification (for these we obtain only by faith), but for other rewards, bodily and spiritual, in this life and after this life, because Paul says, 1 Cor. 3:8: Every man shall receive his own reward, according to his own labor. There will,

⁴⁵ Let it be emphasized here that Snodgrass, “Justification by Grace,” misinterprets Rom 2 totally as he insists on “justification by grace—to the doers.” Romans 2:12–13, in contrast to 2:6–11 as a balanced chiasmic unit, does no more account for the notion of judgment according to works but justification, which never occurs by works of the law. Cf. here also Ap IV 252: “‘To be justified’ here does not mean that a wicked man is made righteous but that he is pronounced righteous in a forensic way, just as in the passage (Rom. 2:13), ‘the doers of the law will be justified.’ As these words, ‘the doers of the law will be justified,’ contain nothing contrary to our position, so we maintain the same about James’s words, ‘A man is justified by works and not by faith alone,’ for men who have faith and good works are certainly pronounced righteous.” Snodgrass, “Justification by Grace,” 86, goes so far as to maintain: “Judgment according to works is not the contradiction of justification by faith, but its presupposition.” Cf. p. 82. For the absolute impossibility of “doing the law,” see Timo Laato, “‘Att göra lagen’ enligt Gal 3,10,” *Teologinen Aikakauskirja* 97 (1992): 216–219; “‘Das Tun des Gesetzes’ in Gal 3,10,” in *Ich will hintreten zum Altar Gottes*, eds. J. Junker and M. Salzmann (Neuendettelsau: Freimund Verlag, 2003), 193–200; and “Paul’s Anthropological Considerations: Two Problems,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 2, *The Paradoxes of Paul*, eds. D. A. Carson, P. T. O’Brien, and M. A. Seifrid (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 353–359.

therefore be different rewards according to different labors. But the remission of sins is alike and equal to all, just as Christ is one, and is offered freely to all who believe that for Christ's sake their sins are remitted.

Certainly, this quotation has an authentic ring to it. It sounds so great because it is biblical.⁴⁶ Needless to say, it is for the very same reason also Lutheran.

⁴⁶ For similar conclusions, cf. Lieselotte Mattern, *Das Verständnis des Gerichtes bei Paulus* (Zürich/Stuttgart: Zwingli, 1966), and Kent L. Yinger, *Paul, Judaism, and Judgment According to Deeds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).