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**The Twofold Work of  
God in the World**



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# Table of Contents

## Inhaltsverzeichnis

Dualities, Religion, and Culture .....	5
Dualities and Dualisms .....	6
The Author .....	8
Impressum .....	9

The following is an excerpt from a forthcoming book, *What Difference does the Trinity Make? A Complete Faith, Life and Worldview* (Bonn: VKW, 2009).

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# The Twofold Work of God in the World

*Thomas K. Johnson*

It may be helpful to notice the way in which the Christian faith recognizes a twofold work of God in the world, the first of which is primarily the work of God the Father, the second of which is primarily the work of God the Son, both of which are made effective in human experience by the Holy Spirit.

1. There are two types of revelation. The first is God's general revelation in creation, whereby God gives all people some awareness of himself and his power, even though some people may claim not to know God and his general revelation; there is also God's special revelation in Christ and Holy Scripture, which gives a more complete knowledge of God and which has its center in the gospel of Christ. General revelation is primarily the work of God the Father through creation, whereas special revelation is primarily the work of Christ the Son and is very closely tied to redemption. Both types of revelation only reach their intended goals through the work of the Holy Spirit.

2. There are two ways in which God gives knowledge of his moral law. The first is a general knowledge of God's law which is the gift of God to all mankind (via general revelation), even to those

who reject this knowledge; there is also a much clearer and deeper knowledge of God's law which comes in Moses, the Ten Commandments, the prophets, and the rest of the Bible, and which is always connected with God's covenant of grace and redemption in Christ. Our knowledge of God's moral will, both as revealed through creation and through scripture, is always dependent on the Holy Spirit.

3. There are two types of grace from God, his common grace which the Father gives to all his creatures to make life possible and to call them to repentance; the second type of grace is his special grace, that of salvation by faith in Christ. The Holy Spirit is the Person who must take the external gift of both types of grace and make them internally effective in the inner life of people and nations.

4. There are two types of righteousness. Active civil righteousness responds to the external demand to practice civic responsibility in our various roles and situations; this righteousness is demanded of us by God the Father by means of his Creation. Passive, spiritual righteousness accepts the free gift of special grace, forgiveness, and salvation

in Christ. Both types of righteousness are dependent on the work of the Holy Spirit.

5. There are two types of wisdom, practical wisdom about how to live effectively in the world which God the Father has created, and spiritual wisdom which consists in a deep knowledge and grasp of the salvation and grace we are given in Christ. Both types of wisdom are dependent on the Holy Spirit, who gives all the true wisdom possessed by all people.

6. There are two kingdoms, meaning two ways in which God rules over our lives. The first is the kingdom of God in which God sometimes remains anonymous, whereby he providentially rules over the affairs of men and nations, using the created orders and structures of his world, to shape our lives, to restrain sin, and to fulfill his purposes. The second is the redeeming reign of Christ over our lives in which we consciously submit to his Word and seek to respond in faith and obedience to Christ as our Lord. Both ways in which God reigns are implemented in human decisions by means of the internal work of the Holy Spirit.

In all of these dualities just described, the first element is primarily the work of God the Father, while the second element is primarily the work of Christ, the Son. We must never forget that the Son was sent into the world by the Father to restore, save, and recreate the Creation and the creatures which were distorted, damaged, and misdirected by sin. This means that in each of these “twos” or

dualities, the second element restores, completes, and renews the first. In older Christian language, “Grace restores nature.” This requires some explanation. We can only properly understand and appreciate the Father’s general revelation through creation when we also accept special revelation in Christ and scripture; nevertheless, that general revelation has a massive effect and influence on the lives of all people. While the general revelation of God’s law, the natural moral law, allows most people to have some true knowledge of right and wrong, and to have some idea of moral responsibility, we can only fully grasp God’s moral law as it comes to us in scripture; nevertheless, the believer’s relationship to the unbelieving world may be distorted if we forget or minimize the natural moral law. Common grace allows many people to live somewhat orderly, honorable, and peaceful lives, but without special grace in Christ, those orderly and honorable lives are empty, hopeless, and terribly misdirected, leading to a horrible end. Civil righteousness is a real possibility for many people, especially if they receive good moral formation from their parents and teachers, so that they can become good neighbors and good citizens; but that civil righteousness is without direction and deep content until it is renewed when the righteousness of faith leads people to want to glorify God in all of life; then civil righteousness is empowered and directed by spiritual righteousness.

## **Dualities, Religion, and Culture**

In all of the six ways previously mentioned, God the Father creates and Christ the Son redeems. The Son restores the work of the Father, and both actions are made effective in human experience by the Holy Spirit. It is important to note that one of the differences between Christianity and most varieties of Islam is that Islam does not normally recognize these six dualities. The differences between Christianity and Islam are not only on the level of claiming to have different special revelations, different paths to salvation, differences on the possibility of certainty of salvation, and differences on many particular ethical questions. It is very difficult for most varieties of Islam to recognize such things as general revelation, common grace, God-given civil righteousness, a God-given natural moral law, or God-given practical wisdom among unbelievers. For this reason Muslims often want to derive their thinking and action for all of life, culture, and government directly from their religious law, the Sharia. In contrast, Christians should recognize a way in which God is directly working in his Creation, even if God sometimes remains partly anonymous or hidden because people suppress their awareness of God, and even if there is little or no direct influence of the Bible on some particular group of people.

Christians have not always been as clear as we should have been in our teaching about the twofold work of

God in the world: sometimes Christians have denied these dualities in a confused desire to be faithful to Christ, while at other times other Christians have talked as if special revelation, saving grace, and spiritual righteousness are unimportant. But in spite of these mistakes, the distinction between the common and special works of God, which recognizes the specificity but unity of the work of the three Persons of the Trinity, has been a very important factor in the shape of life and culture in the western world. This idea is behind such important cultural/legal practices such as the freedom of religion and the separation (without hostility) between church and state. This duality means that Christians have felt free to accept cultural gifts (such as education, government, technology, medicine, and law) from our culture, criticize our culture, and contribute to our culture, without demanding that our biblical faith be imposed on the culture as a condition of our culture's legitimacy. This is very different from most varieties of Islam, which want a culture and government to be somehow Islamic before they can recognize it as legitimate.

In Romans 13:1 Paul wrote, "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established." It is noteworthy that many of the authorities which Paul encountered, especially the Roman authorities, were not somehow "Christian" authorities. The Roman Empire and Emperor did not recognize the God of the Bible, and

most local Roman governors and local rulers were not personally Christians. Nevertheless, Paul says they were established by God. This important biblical claim alternately assumes or implies most of the dualities mentioned here.

## Dualities and Dualisms

To avoid misunderstanding, it is necessary to contrast the proper dualities of the Christian faith with several varieties of dualism, which have often disturbed the faith of believers. At least four or five varieties of dualism have caused problems for believers during the last twenty centuries, and most of these beliefs come back repeatedly. These varieties of dualism are worth describing.

1. Zoroastrian dualism of the ancient world thought there are two powers of about equal power, one good and one evil. The world was seen as a conflict between these two powers, and evil actions by people may not really be our responsibility, because such actions may be under the power of the evil deity. There were echoes of this type of dualism in the beliefs of the Marcion, which were described in a previous chapter. Though Christians believe in a devil or Satan, he is never described as even remotely comparable in power to God, since God is the Creator of all, including Satan. Christians traditionally describe Satan as a chief angel who fell into pride, which shows that Satan is incomparably less than God in every respect.

A Zoroastrian type of dualism should be totally rejected by Christians.

2. Hellenistic dualism, also common in the ancient world, taught that only invisible spiritual entities are real and good, while the material, physical realm is either not fully real or not fully good. There were strong influences of this belief system in Gnosticism, and this idea tends to come back repeatedly throughout history. As mentioned above, it is completely the opposite of the biblical teaching about the goodness and reality of creation.

3. Medieval nature/grace dualism is somewhat like Hellenistic dualism but it is partly adapted to central Christian beliefs. The physical realm of “nature” is seen as real, but it may not be very important to God and it may not be very good. According to this way of thinking, God is mostly interested in the unseen realm of grace, which is somehow detached from the world of nature, and the Christian life does not really have much to do with everyday life. Believers may be urged to ascend from the world of nature to a higher realm of grace. This type of dualism recurs in Christian circles throughout history. It is overcome once we see that God is very interested in his good creation, that God is very active in his good creation (by means of general revelation and providence), that Jesus became a real man with a real soul and body, and that salvation means the restoration of all of God’s creation.

4. The modern and postmodern public/private dualism says that faith or religion is a private and personal matter that has little or nothing to do with important public matters such as education, law, government, medicine, and business. This way of thinking suggests that faith may be privately interesting but it is publicly irrelevant, since faith is irrational and public life must be strictly rational. This way of thinking is really an attack on core Christian beliefs which has prompted numerous Christian thinkers to write about both the rational coherence of the Christian faith and the significance of the biblical message for all the areas of public life. A proper understanding of the proper dualities of the Christian faith helps us see that God is extensively involved in all the important areas of public life, even if some people refuse to recognize God's role in such things as practical wisdom or civic righteousness. Wise political rationality should be seen as a gift of God's common grace for the proper ordering of public life, to promote a proper civic righteousness.

5. There is also a type of dualism which is really a special variety of the public/private dualism. This says that natural science tells us the full truth about the physical world while faith tells us something about our subjective world of feelings, hopes, values, and meaning. This removes faith and religion from the realm of truth, while it also tends to describe the physical world as a vast evolving machine without any concern for our hopes, fears, and joys.

This way of talking assumes atheism, but allows simple believers to remain in their stupidity, if it makes them happy. Religion may be seen as less harmful than drugs, if that is what it takes to help people find irrational meaning and hope. As soon as we see that God is the Creator and Ground of all being and all truth, we will react in horror to this type of dualism.

Many Christians will find a little of one or more of these types of dualism in their hearts and minds. One of the steps toward overcoming the various dualisms is to learn to fully understand and appreciate the proper dualities of the Christian faith. All of the dualities arise from the difference between the work of the Father and that of the Son, but the connections between both parts of the proper dualities become clear when we see that Jesus, the Christ, came to restore the creation of his Father and ours. The proper dualities of the Christian faith are the opposite of the various dualisms which are contrary to the biblical message.

# The Author

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