

Selective Harmony

Not too long ago a dear brother chided me somewhat for making waves and protesting various teachings and practices among a fellowship to which we both were close. The points in view seemed to me destructive to Christian life and witness. He thought I should remain silent about them, lest I cause division among brethren who ought to be united “for the glory of Christ”. Yet this same brother quite often launches his own vigorous attack against other Christian groups and practices. The point made is not that we should not cry out against error. It is quite alright to do that provided the object of our protest is outside our camp. The thing we must avoid is any agitation inside our fellowship.

This sort of mentality is not new to me. I first encountered it in my parents’ Assembly of God church. These people felt that they had a duty to maintain a united front with any communion or group that believed in speaking in tongues. Likewise, they felt that their common enemy, and the one they needed to fight most fiercely, was any church which did not practice an exhibition of supernatural spiritual gifts. This tenacious and tedious tongue alliance became somewhat strained, first by the United Pentecostals with their anti-trinitarianism and their water-tongues regeneration, then more seriously by modern Neo-Pentecostalism with its embracing of Catholics, Mormons, Moslems, and generally any religious pagan who has “gotten the Baptism”. Sadly, most mainline A.O.G.s now, having buried their former conservative beliefs and Biblical integrity, are not too uncomfortable with this motley fellowship.

This unwritten code of selective harmony next appeared to me in Southern Baptist churches. We could cuss out the Catholics, put down the Presbyterians, mock the Methodists, poke fun at the Pentecostals, laugh at the Lutherans, argue down the Anglicans, even butt heads with the B.M.A.s; but we dare not point out any errors among Southern Baptists. These, my immediate spiritual forebears, whose roots are firmly planted in the soil of divine sovereignty and salvation by grace alone, now like to consider themselves “non-creedal”. The center of fellowship is the Cooperative Program, the financial idol to which all good Southern Baptists must pay dues and reverence. Southern Baptists, therefore, are free to criticize error, apostasy, immorality, dishonesty, greed and worldliness, anywhere except in the Cooperative Program, its officers and agencies. Harmony must be maintained there at all costs. Churches are free to preach what they wish, interpret the Bible in any way they please, tolerate and promote any life-style imaginable . . . as long as they support the Program.

Some twenty-three years ago, through some serious theological questions put to me by a friend, and consequent diligent search through the scriptures with a reluctantly open mind, God persuaded me that He saves men sovereignly of His Own free will and according to His eternal purpose in Himself. I had never heard of Arthur Pink or read a Puritan reprint. I certainly knew nothing of a “Sovereign Grace Movement”, Calvinism, Reformed Theology, or even “Grace Churches”. So great was my ignorance, that, when assigned the topic “Irresistible Grace” in a Conference of the Five Points, I waited eagerly to find out what the other four points were.

Needless to say, I was delighted with the fellowship which developed from that. It was quite small at that time, compared to what it is now. The orderly system of theology, the sane, open, candid approach to the Bible, especially those truths of redemption, which had been run over rough-shod by man-centered evangelism, was a balm to my grieving spirit, and a refreshing spring to a soul that longed to see God glorified.

The solid steel of divine sovereignty and redemption by free grace which made the line about which all the revelation of God was woven, from the first chapter of Genesis all the way through the Apostolic writings, was already real to me. Now, discovering that the bone and fiber of true Christian history had left a rich library of the same sort in God-exalting, man-abasing literature, was a great comfort and encouragement. Truth had not altogether fallen in the street. God had not only preserved His remnant, but had preserved true doctrine.

Here is the communion to which I belong, I thought. Here are people with open Bibles, men who trust in naught but Jesus Christ and hope only in His righteousness, whose single desire and purpose is to obey and glorify God in whatever may please Him. This is indeed the true gospel, and these are the true people of God. Such were my thoughts at that time.

I am still persuaded that these sentiments are true in a general sense, but they have had to be qualified by the reality of corruption in every good thing by the weakness of the flesh and the subtilty of the Serpent.

The idea that our fellowship should be either exclusive or inclusively among “Reformed” or “Sovereign Grace” people is especially fallacious.

A swarm of flies in the ointment of inclusive communion among all who profess to believe what has come to be known as the “doctrines of grace” immediately appears. Let us consider what we are called upon to embrace if we are to walk with all who agree with us on the five points of Calvinism.

Reformed Theology takes its name from the so-called Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, and the body of teachings left by the leading figures of that event, namely, Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Melancthon, Knox and others. Although these men began well, their efforts to reform a hopelessly apostate Roman Catholic Church fell far short. As a result, although they managed to recover the centerpiece of soteriology, justification by faith, the carried into Reformed churches so much leaven of the old harlot, that their own corruption was inevitable.

The first and most basic of these was the idea of a sacral society: All the members of a given community must belong to the established religion. Most Christians are aware of the brutal Roman sword that compelled heathens to be baptized and become “Christians” or die. And we know that thousands of true Christians died at the hands of the Pope’s armies rather than become a part of the pagan counterfeit that calls itself the Roman Catholic Church. But I think that we have ignored the fact that the Protestant churches

brought sacral Christendom along into the Reformation. As a consequence, more Christians were murdered under the Protestant and Reformed flag than under the Roman Catholic. To this day, many Reformed churches herd multitudes into their fold, if not by the state's sword, then by society's ostracization, and economic and political persecution. I find it somewhat difficult to fellowship with him who thinks God's grace may be coerced upon a man.

Another legacy from the Roman church that carried over into Reformed churches was sacramentalism. The pre-Constantinian church knew of no means of grace other than preaching the word of God. Men became partakers of Christ by voluntary response to the word and faith in God. But that would not do in a sacral society. If the church is to be comprised of only those who voluntarily believe the word of God, then the community will be divided into Christians and non-Christians. This the state would never allow. Hence a host of sacraments, all shrouded in deep mystery and touted as having magical powers of bestowing salvation benefits on the recipient, were devised and instituted. The Bible was closed and "Masses" spoken in Latin. Thus people were robbed of truth and shut up to superstitious ignorance. Even though the Reformers helped put the Bible back in the hands of the people, they only reduced the number and changed the names of the sacraments.

That is why most Reformed churches are still pedobaptists. Baptism was retained as a sacrament which provided the means of bringing infants into the Church as soon as they were born into society. This is not the place to debate infant baptism, but it will suffice for the time to point out that it has absolutely no basis either in precept or precedent anywhere in the whole Bible. It is utterly opposed to salvation by the free grace of God. And the proposal that the children of the elect are elect also, is an absurd contradiction of grace, invented solely to give some dignity to the sprinkling of babies. It fits quite well in a sacral society, but has no place in a church comprised of believers only, converted by the sovereign grace of God.

With the sacral society and sacramental grace, an order of priests separate from the laity is necessary. Again, it was the post-Constantinian church which set up sacerdotalism. The Reformers never forsook it. To this day, the hierarchy in Reformed churches claims the right to give or withhold "orders" . . . who will and who will not be ministers of the churches. And these priests have power to administer the sacraments that minister grace. Out with such pompous and pretentious superstitions! The true Christian church knows of none of it!!

We might want to be a little cautious about permitting ourselves to be called "Calvinists". That is, unless one believes in double predestination as did the learned Calvin. While the Bible teaching that God freely chose some to receive eternal salvation might logically lead one to conclude that He predestined others to eternal damnation, no such conclusion is taught in the Bible. And it is wholly contrary to the gracious character of God that is revealed in the scripture. I am certainly not that much of a "Calvinist".

Closely akin to this double predestination is the theory of extreme Supralapsarianism. According to this view, election and reprobation precedes creation in the divine decree, and God deliberately created some men for glory and some for eternal damnation. This not only makes God the author of sin, but sin has nothing to do with men's punishment. It is wholly a thing of God's arbitrary decree. Again, such a God and such a teaching is alien to the scriptures.

There are, to be sure, moderate Supralapsarians who do not hold these extreme views, as well as Infralapsarians who cannot be charged with demeaning the sovereignty of God. It would be well if we left off this high-minded attempt to second guess the Eternal Mind and get on with revealed truth. We have enough to divide us in our understanding of these, without reaching into the areas of divine purpose out of reach of the mortal mind.

Both of the above extreme and fatalistic views figure strongly among "Hard-Shell Baptists" and other hyper-Calvinists who spurn evangelism and missions. Reasoning that God sovereignly and effectively saves whomsoever He wills and only those, they refuse to preach the gospel to the lost. Again, this is perfectly sound human reasoning, but it is contrary to the word and ways of God which far transcend the human mind. This may be good systematic theology, but it is not Biblical theology.

Another incongruous critter in the "Grace" camp is the Antinomian. Believing rightly that we are justified by grace through faith and counted perfectly righteous before God wholly apart from any works of the law, they then erroneously deduce that the law is of no use or benefit to him whose righteousness is of Christ. It is wholly folly to assume that the believer is not in need of God's moral instructions. Christ's teachings abound with it. The epistles bristle with it. This generation is no less obstinate and ignorant than that generation of believers. But these modern libertines preach only a "positive gospel" of Christ only. Having no moral instructions, it is not surprising when their numbers give themselves to loose and immoral behaviour. These "Grace" people are in grave danger of turning the grace of God into lasciviousness.

If I am to walk in unruffled harmony with all grace people, then I must keep my lip zipped shut about my Landmark Baptist brethren's absurd doctrine of ecclesiastical succession. These heirs of the teachings of the worthy J. R. Graves would have us believe that only a church with the name "Baptist" over the door is a valid church, and Baptism ministered under any other authority is spurious. Their arrogance differs from the Pope's in only one point: He asserts that he can shut you out of heaven' and they affirm that only Baptists will be in the Bride. These people are prone to preach more church than they do grace. I can well receive these dear saints as brethren, but do not expect me to smile and swallow their error.

Then there are the Reconstructionists. These solid Reformed people think that we should Christianize society. This is going some beyond a sacral society. Christian sacralism cares little about the moral behaviour of its members. It just wants everyone to bow down to the state religion. But Reformed Reconstructionists want to regiment the church into the business of making men behave right by the power of the State's sword. The only sword the Christian church knows is that of the Spirit, and its means of suasion is inward, not external.

A particular popular Reformed cult today can only be described by the term "rationalism". In their zeal to combat raging wild subjectivism, they have utterly ruled out the inward subjective workings of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of men. Not only have they dismissed any and all supernatural phenomenon as belonging to another dispensation, but they put saving faith on a purely intellectual basis. Calvinism . . . the whole system of Reformed Theology . . . lends itself dangerously to this bent. Men with great minds and little

hearts have found prominent places in its ranks. Because of this, the cold chill of intellectual admiration is busily quenching what little warm fervor of personal gracious and hearty Christianity that remains.

In recent years another powerful group has appeared on the Reformed scene. Although these learned people make impressive noises about justification by faith, they leave little motivation for such justification, since they have ruled eternal punishment out of the Bible. These ex-Seventh Day Adventists have rebelled against the legalism of their former faith, but have brought Annihilations along with their theological baggage into the Grace camp. Some Grace people have heartily received them because of the common five points. I had rather fellowship with someone who knows the full value of Christ's atonement. God's is a great salvation because He rescued us from an awful damnation.

There they are. No less than a dozen deadly serious aberrations among people who claim doctrinal decendancy from the Reformation. And we could certainly come up with dozens more, of more or less consequence. Are we to hold a solid unity with all of this error, simply to put up a united front against the Arminians? At what cost will this be to our conscience, to our high view of the full and sole authority in the Holy Scriptures, and to our credibility as preachers to a people who are not such fools that they cannot see the contradictions we embrace? Too much, I think. Such unity is not unity of Spirit, but of party.

Nor does it seem reasonable to me that we who believe in grace should exclude from our fellowship all who do not center their preaching around the five points of Calvinism. I will readily admit that the vast majority of professing evangelical churches today are worse than Arminian. They are grace-hating, man-exalting Pelagians. And they ought to be utterly avoided. There can be no fellowship with him whose trust is in the arm of flesh.

But there are multitudes of beloved saints of the Lord who, for reasons known only to God, have not been able to explore and examine theological truth to the extent some of us have. Although they may not be able to see or teach the "five points" with the same gusto some of us do, they do give a warm, God-honouring, man-abasing redemptive message. They believe in the full and complete substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ, His present intercessory work on behalf of those who claim no righteousness before God but His, the priesthood of all believers, the freedom and power of God to do as He pleases, the sole and full authority of the Bible, the return of Christ, the resurrection and eternal judgment. Among these are saints whose fervent obedience to the Lord in witnessing, prayer and holy living puts most Calvinists to shame. What egotistical idiots are we who would call these "wild-eyed Arminians" unworthy of our fellowship while at the same time we embrace those rotten with the leaven of Rome!

Surely if we fellowship only with those who agree with us about everything, we will fellowship with no one. We must tolerate some of what we see as error in all fellow believers. Some, we will not be able to walk with. Some, we will. It might be well to back off and ask ourselves if our criteria is reasonable, in view of *all* the revealed word of God. The Pharisees were not the last to swallow camels while straining out gnats. Most of us have had some unpleasant experiences that left something sticking in our throats, and have been making lop-sided noises ever since then. Get it out, and get the priorities right! We are not here to attack our brothers in Christ. Nor are we to advance a church, a denomination, a movement, a system of theology, an idea, a cause; but to glorify God in the salvation of sinners by faith in His Son, Jesus Christ.

- C. M.