

Grace and Humility

A strange vine is growing in Zion's vineyard. Springing up from the sturdy stock of Calvinism, rooted and nourished by the fertile soil of Christian patriarchs and Puritans, spreading wide, verdant foliage out under the bright sunlight of sovereign grace preaching and teaching, yet it brings forth bitter fruits of arrogance, pride, haughtiness, and from more than a few branches, a careless, worldly, sensual and lawless vintage. This strange mutation has grown so rapidly and is so prolific with its branches dipping down and re-rooting themselves all over, that Zion's fruitful hill is nearly covered with it. One is hard-pressed to find, growing in only a few obscure spots, a faithful vine, yielding the sweet grapes of humility, meekness, condescension, sacrificial love and servitude. A subtle counterfeit has supplanted the real.

More directly stated, sovereign grace, i.e., Calvinism, especially the doctrines of grace, is rapidly becoming identified with a company of egotistical, arrogant stuffed shirts, who carefully gather their "orthodox" robes closely about them (lest they be tainted by contact with Arminians or legalist/moralists) as they sneer and snicker at everyone less enlightened than themselves.

The pattern of apostasy seldom varies. The counterfeit proliferates (popular because it *is* counterfeit and not real) by first imitating and then supplanting everything. It was true of Israel. Only an almost invisible remnant remains out of ethnic Israel. It is true of every denomination, school and movement in Christian history. Of the massive institutions that remain, the true faith is hidden away in the tangle and morass of men's religious tradition. It is true of the whole of Christendom. Of all in this present world that is now called Christian, the tiniest portion, utterly unseen by most of the world, remains truly Christian.

It should come as no shock, then, when I propose that perhaps most of what we call the recovery of the truths of free grace is failing the Lord's "litmus" test: "*By their fruits you shall know them.*" Why should this movement be exempted from falling victim to the same tactic the devil has found eminently successful against every Christian endeavor in history? If one answers, "Because of the soundness of the doctrine," let us be reminded that we are not saved or preserved by a doctrine or a creed, but by a Person. Separated from Him, it is only dead letter, not spirit, and can do no more than kill. No one knows more true doctrine than he who is called "a murderer from the beginning". It was he who, knowing the truth, yet "*abode not in the truth because there is no truth in him*" (John 8:44).

But what are we suggesting here? A proud Calvinist? What an anomaly! Incredible! Impossible! How could one even utter such a contradiction? It is like speaking of a Christian atheist, a virtuous whore or a sodomite preacher. Yet, come to think of it, those contradictions are already stoutly affirmed to exist, and are rapidly becoming common.

Let us not too quickly close our minds to, not only the possibility, but the horrible reality, that we ourselves might become a doctrinal Calvinist while a total stranger to the humility and brokenness that is utterly inseparable from true conversion to Christ.

Humility is the hallmark, not of Calvinism, but of Christianity. Calvinism makes claim to it because its doctrine exalts God's sovereignty and highlights man's unworthiness and helplessness. But one may easily subscribe to this information as true while knowing nothing of it experimentally. Such a person has never been humbled. There are a number of popularly believed errors that entrench the faulted concept that humility and the doctrines of grace are inseparable.

The following questions need to be posed concerning these errors.

Question One

Is love of the doctrines of grace synonymous with the love of the truth?

There is the idea that love of the doctrines of grace is synonymous with the love of the truth. While the doctrines of grace are certainly true, one may love them, not because they are true, but simply because he *likes them*. That is a fatal defect. We must love truth solely because it is truth, not because we like it. Otherwise, we shall love only that truth we like and hate the truth we do not like. I have known lazy scoundrels who loved these doctrines because in them they found an excuse for their indulgence. They refused to work, preferring to lie in bed all day, reading sovereign grace books, expecting God to feed them *and* their families "as he feeds the sparrows".

Others like the doctrines because they see in them a refuge from their incompetence and their failure to study the Word, sharpen their skills, seek the face and favor of the Lord, and fight the good fight of faith. They are delighted to remain among the ignorant, base and despised, that "God may have all the glory".

Still others love Calvinism because it has been the creed of the intellectual giants of Christian history. Imagining themselves to be in that upper class, they devour the greatest divines' works, filling their minds with these lofty thoughts and ideals, and their mouths with profound quotations. And while their egos are swelling, their souls are shrinking and dying. The divines drank at the fountain, but these pretenders are only floundering in the waters downstream. I have even known people who loved the doctrines of grace because they hated souls! These are religious hypocrites who do not like people. They call themselves God-centered, but their love of the Creator is denied by their hatred of His image. They have no desire to see men saved. Rather, they delight in such doctrines as God's hatred of the wicked, reprobation, and eternal punishment, not because they love justice and God's righteousness, but solely because of a bitter, hateful spirit. There are vast numbers of sensual, sin-loving worldlings who love sovereignty because they see in it a release from all responsibility to either seek salvation for their souls or to mortify sinful flesh in self-denial. They imagine that grace has abrogated law and that salvation is nothing more than substitution and passive regeneration.

A vast number of preachers, with little or no fixed theological persuasion, are jumping on the Calvinistic bandwagon now, because they see it becoming a current, popular fad. The list could go on, but it ought to be easy to see that many, many more will embrace these doctrines for wrong reasons rather than for the one right reason.

Question Two

Do these doctrines have power in themselves to humble people?

Another popular error is the idea that these doctrines have power in themselves to humble people. This can be observed in the titles of conferences whose announced objectives are to “humble the pride of man”. One also hears the statement or reads it in sovereign grace literature, that “these doctrines are so humbling to man”. Now, it might be that a man who has *been* humbled under the mighty hand of God can see in the doctrines of grace truths that *ought* to make men humble, but the doctrines themselves have no efficacy to do so. We are not humbled by a doctrine, but by a Person.

The effect that a particular truth will have upon a person is determined by what he *is*. It cannot make him what he *ought to be*. Only God can do that. We have just noted how multitudes of people love the doctrines of grace because they see in them something that makes them comfortable in their sin. It does absolutely no good to tell these people that what they see in the doctrines is not there. They see things that are not there because their “eye is evil”. Unless we have been fitted with proper ears and eyes by the grace of God, we also would be seeing what is not there and missing what is.

The fact of the matter is that information is more likely to “puff up” than to humble (1 Corinthians 8:1). Especially is this true when this information is only a “form (appearance) of knowledge” (Romans 2:20). It is no better than having a “form of godliness” while denying the power of God (2 Timothy 3:5). We do not really *know* what we have not experienced. We only learn the information, and it is yet unreal to us. So is the person who learns all *about* the doctrines of grace but who is yet a proud, strutting, independent rebel in his heart. And it shows horribly!

Question Three

Are Christians who are not theological Calvinists necessarily proud?

Closely akin to the immediately aforementioned error is the idea that Christians who are not theological Calvinists (we use the standard handles) but Arminians, are proud. We can quickly get ourselves painted into a corner with this one. All sorts of unworthy attitudes and actions are imputed to this “proud Arminian Christian”. He is said to thank himself for his salvation, since he supplied the faith and repentance, since he was the one who tipped the scales and secured his salvation. That is an absurd caricature, and is no more accurate than the Arminian painting Calvinists as puppets or passive pawns. I know no such Christian, and have known about as many Arminians as Calvinists.

The truth is that there is no such thing as a proud Christian. If we must have the Arminian proud, then we must have him lost, for no man can come to God with the idea that he is putting up his part and God is obliged to put up His. One cannot be saved with such an attitude. What we have done by insisting that *only* Calvinists are humble, and *that* by the doctrines of grace, is to supply the rationale for the current tulip regenerationalist cult, which asserts that a person must hear and believe the five points in order to become a Christian.

If we are not saying that, then we are saying something even more absurd with the humble-Calvinist/proud-Arminian theory. We imply that we who are converted while still ignorant of the peculiarities of Calvinistic soteriology are all yet unbroken and proud.

In this view, if we are to add humility to our experience, we must do it by learning the doctrines of grace. Humility, thus considered, is not in the essence of conversion, but something acquired by an intellectual grasp of good theology. This, however, cannot be true, for our Lord tells us that unless we become humble as little children, we shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:3-4).

People are not humbled and converted as either Calvinists or Arminians, but as guilty sinners. It is a God-granted revelation of *Himself* in the beauty of His holiness and of *ourselves personally*, not man *in general*, in our wretchedness, our bloodguiltiness, our inexcusable wickedness and unbelief. It is revelation given in spite of divine goodness despised, love spurned, majesty trampled, and entreaties ignored. The goodness of God leads us to repentance. It is the realization of our utter unworthiness to be even breathing God’s air that puts us in the dust before His blessed feet, praying, entreating, seeking forgiveness and mercy – a salvation that every person in such circumstances *knows* is God’s alone to freely give or to withhold. *That* is the humbling factor, not election and predestination.

The question of whether we are supplying the faith and repentance or whether these graces are the gift of God is never considered. The gospel demands of God is never considered. The gospel demands this of us. We all must *do* it. We are not even conscious of our repenting and believing. If we were, it would not be faith and repentance at all, but either an empty academic experiment or trust in a magical liturgy, neither of which would avail anything. We are simply overwhelmed by, and responding to, the presence of the Ancient of ages, before Whose face the heavens and earth flee. Calvinist and Arminian may wrangle about where these graces come from later, but the Arminian must admit them to be gifts of God, and the Calvinist must admit that *he*, as a free agent, must repent and believe just like the Arminian – no difference.

And what does the Bible tell us of the information supplied in the gospel under which such conversions occur? Remarkably little. The heart of the gospel is stated in 2 Corinthians 5:19, 21: “*To wit that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation . . . For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.*” The duties of the gospel? Romans 10:9: “*That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.*” One may search diligently through the sermons preached by the evangelists to sinners and find no more than two facts pressed upon their consciences: 1) Jesus Christ died upon the cross, and that by your wicked hands; and 2) God raised him from the dead, and exalted Him as Lord. To be sure, we are taught far more theology than that in the book of Acts, and more yet in the epistles,

but this is the gospel set before lost men by the early church. I doubt that sinners today are any more sophisticated in spiritual realities that will enable them to respond properly to much more than that.

It is certain that the apostles taught their converts the truth which we now call the doctrines of grace very early, and if we are to avoid leaving our people ignorant and vulnerable to Arminian error, we must do likewise. *But if we attempt to evangelize with lectures on high theology, while viciously slapping at our Arminian brothers, we should not be surprised when we beget cocky and arrogant Calvinists rather than meek and humble Christians.*

One may well hear some Arminians bragging of their success in their ministry, the number of souls they have won and of churches built. Calvinists, on the other hand, might just find themselves boasting about making more orthodox noises. I doubt that there is much difference in the lack of humility in either case.

Question Four

Are there misplaced emphases and applications of the various truths that make up the doctrines of grace?

A fourth error is misplaced emphases and applications of the various truths that make up the doctrines of grace. Certainly, this question must be answered in the affirmative. I will briefly address a few of these misplaced emphases and applications.

Total Depravity or Total Inability

Although these two terms are used interchangeably for the same point, they are usually treated differently in the Bible. *We* may find it easy to arrive at the logical conclusion that they are one, for no man *can* do what he *will not* do. But few people (certainly not unconverted sinners) think like that. Passages such as Isaiah 59:1-13 and Romans 3:10-18 are intended to point up man's responsibility, not his inability. And if one reads these passages, not having been instructed to think otherwise, he would be singularly struck that he was to blame for the mess he is in, *not* that he was *unable* to do anything about it. I think that is precisely the impression that they are intended to make. They are set forth to display the sinner's ruin, his blasphemous unbelief and idolatry, his moral rottenness, his wicked ingratitude and his deserving of eternal punishment. That is the kind of humbling a sinner can relate to. He cannot make the connection between a demand for repentance and an asserted inability to do so.

Total depravity is a condition which describes the unconverted person. It has no carry-over whatever to the new man created after God in righteousness and true holiness. Inability, however, relates to both. A few passages, such as John 6:44, establish a sinner's inability to repent and believe apart from special enabling grace, but that statement is made in the face of resolute hostility to Christ and the gospel, not in the expectation of humbling men in conversion. Much more numerous are those scriptures which tell us of our inability to rid ourselves of our guilt and stain (Jeremiah 13:23, Hebrews 10:1-4), to bring forth any good and acceptable fruit (Matthew 7:18), and, even as believers, to do anything apart from the effectual enablement of Christ (John 15:5, 1 Corinthians 3:7, 2 Corinthians 3:5). We are the circumcision "*which . . . have no confidence in the flesh*" (Philippians 3:3). That is an inability, an *exercise in impotence* that is truly humbling to the true believer. In the words of Wesley's hymn,

"Hangs my helpless soul on Thee," and "All my trust on Thee is stayed; All my help from Thee I bring; Cover my defenseless head with the shadow of Thy wing."

Unconditional Election

It is not easy to take a truth so blessed and clear as election, and contemplate it in such a way as to provoke strutting. *But some have managed to regard the elect as more properly the elite.* We are given more Bible to teach us that God has chosen the worst and dullest rather than the best and brightest. "*But God hath chosen the foolish, . . . weak, . . . and base, . . . and despised, . . . and things that are not*" (1 Corinthians 1:27-28).

The fact that a few of the wise, mighty and noble are called will provide the proud person grounds to believe that he is included in that company, despite all evidence to the contrary. But even so, if these words are to be taken seriously, we must abide in this reality – the world of the non-elect is far superior to us in every aspect except the grace of God. We are, indeed, so far as the natural man is concerned (our intellectual, physical, social and psychological powers), the sorriest of humanity's lot. Election is intended to show God's free love, His initiative, His determined redemptive purpose. It is more suited to display His willingness to save the worst among us than the best.

Limited Atonement

In the death of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross we have the heart of the gospel. It is a doctrine with which we can tolerate no meddling. Here, the least distraction can cause the most mischief. It is vital that it be preserved, not only from false teachings, but in its *essential focus and emphasis*. I fear that we, as Calvinists, have come up short on the latter. Theologians plow through all the divergent theories (moral influence, example, governmental, ransom, commercial, mystical – all better suited to glorify man and the devil rather than God), and come up with the Bible doctrine of satisfaction, teaching that Christ died as a Substitute, in the place of sinners, and fully satisfied the just demands of God's law for their transgressions.

Astute thinkers then go a step further and correctly conclude that if the death of Christ actually satisfied the sinner's debt, then the sinner must be saved, and therefore He died only for those who shall finally be saved. But again, few people (certainly not sinners) think like that. And the gospel in the Bible is not preached in those terms. "*Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain*" (Acts 2:23). "*But ye denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer be granted unto you; And killed the Prince of life . . .*" (Acts 3:14). "*. . . Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead . . .*" (Acts 7:52). "*But God commended his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us*" (Romans 5:8). "*When we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son*" (Romans 5:10). "*In whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.*" (Ephesians 1:7). "*And having made peace through the blood of His cross*", "*And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath He reconciled in the body of His flesh through death . . .*" (Colossians 1:20, 21-22). "*For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the Just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but*

quickened by the Spirit” (1 Peter 4:18). These few selections are far more representative of the death of the Lord Jesus in its central focus and emphasis in the Bible than its limited aspect, and they are far more suited to breaking and humbling the quickened sinner.

We might find ourselves more humbled if we meditated upon them more. My heart must first be crushed, then enlarged with the awesome revelation that He died for me. Information on the scarcity of for whom else He died is not very impressive. I alone am responsible for His suffering. He has put away *my* sins. If that is the weight the Holy Spirit presses on the regenerate sinner’s heart from the death of Christ, perhaps it is the sound we ought to echo.

Irresistible Grace

The blessed truth of irresistible grace is stated in its most lucid and indisputable form in John 6:44 and 12:32. In the former case, Jesus is setting forth a “hard doctrine” that effectually divided his followers. In the latter, He is comforting His disciples in the shadow of His imminent death. In no case do we find this teaching employed in positive evangelism, that is, entreating men to Christ. Sinners in such circumstances are not assured that they will be brought to Christ, but that they *must come* or else perish. Indeed, they must *strive* to get in. But the person who is truly regenerate and repentant has the stark realization, that in spite of his obstinate and unreasonable resistance and rebellion, his wicked unbelief, his perpetual running from God, his love of sin and hatred of righteousness – in spite of all that, the Saviour patiently, persistently, lovingly pursued and won him. *That* is a humbling revelation. And no converted child of God, irrespective of his theological persuasion, is without it. He is a grateful believer, knowing well that he has none but God to thank for his salvation.

The Perseverance of the Saints

The perseverance of the saints, as a doctrine to be lived, arises out of humility. The true child of God has no confidence in the flesh. He does not consider himself able to stand. His safety and assurance is entirely contingent upon a continual resting in and looking to His Saviour. Past experiences, blessings, victories and answered prayers are all helpful, but he dares put no trust in them. He believes in God. Such a believer, such a humbled soul, God has sworn to preserve. He will be “*kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time*” (1 Peter 1:5).

Question Five

Have we allowed Arminian excesses to crowd us into a polemic tone and debating stance?

Finally, we make the mistake of treating the sovereignty of God in an academic sense rather than a practical one. *We have allowed Arminian excesses to crowd us into a polemic tone and debating stance.* This is unproductive to either evangelism or Christian growth in grace. I appreciate the fact that false doctrine must be silenced by painstakingly formulated systematic theology and creedal statements. Historic councils have done that, and the fruits of those fought-out doctrines must be passed on to succeeding generations of men called and charged with rightly dividing the word of truth.

The Christian church, however, lives in a practical world, not an academic one. High theology ought to be reserved for the classroom, not the pulpit. A great part of our lives is lived in the market and work places where we have opportunity to give a gospel witness in terms that will make an impression on hearts and consciences, not just minds. There we need to preach the living God, immanent and relevant to our being and living, not abstract theology about Him.

A struggling and dying world needs a God Who is big enough to fully save and able to help, to deliver and provide for our needs. Unworthy sinners need to see a free, unfettered God, One Whose cause of kindness and mercy lies fully within Himself, not the sinner’s merit. Downtrodden, abused, suffering humanity needs to know a God rich in mercies, abounding in grace, tender in compassion, moved by our infirmities and needs.

Blind, groping, stumbling souls need to fix their compasses on a God Who is absolutely wise and right in His law, judgments, precepts, ways and providence. Rebellious sinners need to see their high-handed treason in light of a God Who is absolutely holy, separate from sin, pure in His Person, sworn to justice, the punishment of the wicked and requiring absolute submission and obedience.

We who are swayed, tossed and blown about by the stormy powers of the world and our own fickle minds, need to see our Creator, the one true God, unchanging, from everlasting to everlasting, forever the same, a Rock, an Anchor, a fixed Resting Place for our souls.

May such a God fill our field of vision, loosen our tongues in praise and adoration, and employ our energies in meek and loving service to one another.

- C. M.