

## Complete Grace

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It has been said that there are two ways in which man formulates his theology. Either he embraces a man-centered theology (*anthropocentric*), or he holds to a God-centered theology (*theocentric*). If one wants to remain consistent with the truth taught in the Bible, that is, what God reveals to his creatures concerning himself, though it may come as a shock, one has no alternative but to choose a God-centered theology. For God declares that all things are done for his purpose and his glory. Therefore, it must follow that the source by which we find this truth will remain consistent with its own affirmation.

However many have distorted their theology so as to center the purposes of God around man. This *inconsistent* position facilitates improper worship and inhibits the due veneration that belongs to God and God alone. I have come to recognize that many claim to have neither the time nor the patience to study tedious disciplines in theology which exuberate such a dichotomous nature to which many have deemed a topic like this to be of secondary importance. Therefore, I have chosen to write a paper on this topic to show the importance and impact it has on the believer; namely, proper humility and adoration. This paper, however, will serve only as a mere introduction and will hopefully provide some thought provoking insight to this controversial issue.

Hodge writes:

The question which of these systems is true is not to be decided by ascertaining which is the more agreeable to our feelings or the more plausible to our understanding, but which is consistent with the doctrines of the Bible and the facts of experience.<sup>1</sup>

Subsequent to the fall of man, God has chosen to reveal himself to his creatures in such a way that it cannot be accepted by the creature unless God has changed their heart because the Gospel remains foolish to him unless he possesses the Spirit of God.<sup>2</sup> For by nature man cannot even confess that Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> Hodge, Charles, *Systematic Theology*, Hendricks Publishing; Reprint 2001. vol. 2, p. 356.

<sup>2</sup> John 3:3, 1st Cor. 2:14.

is Lord but by the Spirit of God, nor is he able to hear Christ's words that he may have life.<sup>3</sup>

Now let us assume a person *does* possess the Spirit of God and has been born again from above – they then enters into a lifelong quarrel with the old man and the new man. The Apostle Paul speaks of this concept as the struggle between the flesh and the Spirit; for the two run contrary to each other and remain at war until death (cf. Rom. 7). He articulates the struggle that goes on inside a believer that one could hardly deny; namely, "...but what I hate, that I do."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it is no wonder that the man of faith who endeavors to "study to show himself approved" will encounter some extremely difficult concepts in the Bible that run contrary to his carnal thinking (2 Pet. 3:16). The resistance that comes from knowing that God is sovereign over all things, even the free agency of man, in my opinion, demonstrates the struggle between the flesh and the Spirit rather adequately.

Let me begin by identifying the three main categories, one of which Christians normally place themselves (though they may use different terminology). The first is called *Pelagianism*. This belief system has its roots in the fifth century where a British monk named Pelagius was engaged in a vicious debate with the Bishop of Hippo – Aurelius Augustine. The conflict began when Pelagius was reading a famous prayer penned by Augustine that had this insightful phrase, "*Give what thou commandest, and command what thou wilt.*" This was a simple utterance of a confession on behalf of Augustine that merely portrayed his reliance on God for everything, including his righteous deeds. Nevertheless, Pelagius was not concerned with the second part of the prayer (for God has the sovereign authority to command whatever he desires); rather his disagreement came from first part. "He [Pelagius] could not conceive that the power to obey the commandment must come from the same source as the commandment itself."<sup>5</sup> This aroused Pelagius to contention against the notion that man was unable to obey the command of God in and of himself. Consequently, Pelagius then raised this question: Is it necessary to have the grace of God in order to obey his commands? Which led him to believe that if God commanded his creatures to fulfill certain commands, then it must follow that man is able to comply, even be holy and righteous. Could God actually command men to perform acts that they were unable to perform? Why then does he still find fault and blame us [for sinning]? For who can resist and withstand his will?<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor. 12:3; John 8:43;

<sup>4</sup> Gal. 5:17; Rom. 7:15.

<sup>5</sup> Schaff, P., & Schaff, D. S. 1997. *History of the Christian Church*. Logos Research Systems, Inc.: Oak Harbor, WA.

<sup>6</sup> *The Amplified Bible*, containing the amplified Old Testament and the amplified New Testament. 1987 . The Lockman Foundation: La Habra, CA.

The second and most widely accepted point of view in our day is called Semi-Pelagianism, also known as *Arminianism*. Though many would not consider themselves Arminian, they are nonetheless. This is a less militant view of Pelagianism and adheres to a more biblical, yet still eroded, stance than that held by Pelagians. Unlike Pelagius, however, Jacob Arminius affirmed that the grace of God was necessary for the salvation of men, but man was still able to reject the Gospel call. He said:

In the very commencement of his conversion, man conducts himself in a purely passive manner; that is, though, by a vital act, that is, by feeling [*sensu*], he has a perception of grace which calls him, yet he can do no other than receive it and feel it. But, when he feels grace affecting or inclining his mind and heart, he freely assents to it; so that he is able at the same time to with-hold his assent.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, Arminius presumed that there was one thing left up to man in his fallen state in order to achieve salvation, namely, to accept God's grace found in the sacrifice of Jesus. This we will see is not what the Bible teaches.

The third point of view according to salvation is the Augustinian or Calvinistic view. This perspective is taken first from the Bible and clarified in the writings of St. Augustine and others. With a deep and profound knowledge of the Scriptures, Augustine concluded that man in his fallen state is completely incapable of even making the choice to accept God's grace. Therefore, God alone (before the foundation of the world, Eph. 1:1-11) makes the election of who to distribute his grace too.

With respect to the condition of man after the fall of Adam, he often pointed to Romans 3:10-12:

There is none righteous, no, not one; There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one.

Hyperbole? I think not. Stated another way, man does not possess the ability, nor have the natural proclivity toward God in any respect whatsoever. This verse is one of the foundations to the Biblical truth that will be considered in this essay.

Now, I desire to take the time to show scriptural proof that will highlight and exemplify the foundation for the doctrine of Predestination. First, I desire to note that the word *predestination* is a biblical word offered in several epistles by the Apostle Paul. The book of John also will provide us with the words of Jesus on

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<sup>7</sup> *The Works of James Arminius*: The London Edition, 2:721 (17.17)

the matter of free will; which will present the necessary revelation. In addition, Paul writes quite extensively in the ninth chapter of the book of Romans that will serve as the culmination for this study.

We find the Apostle Paul stating in Ephesians chapter 2 verse 1 that "while we were dead in our sins, He made us alive." Then verse five repeats something similar by saying, "while we were dead in trespasses, He made us alive." I do not think the apostle was referring to anything done on the person's part, that is, according to the flesh, that is, by free and autonomous choice on behalf of the sinner. Rather this is God's work in us, without our assistance. This is clearly seen when Paul goes on to state in 2:8, "For by Grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is a gift from God, not of works, lest anyone should boast." The Arminian might *incorrectly* interpret the Apostle Paul by saying, "For by faith you have been saved, through grace, and this is partially on your behalf (only one percent according to a leading evangelist) but the glory is God's because he initiated it." However, Dr. Robert Reymond has adequately stated:

Man contributes nothing that is ultimately determinative of his salvation-not good works (Eph. 2:8-; 2 Tim. 1:9; Tit. 3:5) because he has none that will commend him savingly to God's favor (Isa. 64:6; Rom.3:10-18, 23), not faith (Acts 11:18; 13:48; 16:14; 18:27; Phil. 1:29) because he has a mind that 'does not subject itself to the law of God [this is depravity], neither is he able to do so [this is inability]' (Rom. 8:7; 1st Cor. 2:14), not the exercise of will (John 1:12-13; Rom. 9:16) because his unregenerate will is in bondage to sin (Rom. 6:17, 19, 20; 7:14-25) and is dead toward God (Eph. 2:1).<sup>8</sup>

Second, I would like to draw our attention to the sixth chapter of the book of John where Jesus is giving a discourse to some of the people of that day on one of the popular seven "I Am's;" (i.e. The Bread of Heaven). In verse 65, we have the Lord stating, "Therefore I have said to you that no one *can* come to me unless it has been given to him by the Father" (*emphasis mine*). The focus here is the word "can." In other words, Jesus says that no man possesses the ability, nor has the authority in and of himself to come to him unless something is administered (given) to him to do so. Here we have one substantial source for the authority of this doctrine. Not only this, but here we also have somewhat of a repetition of 44th verse where John says, "No one who *can* come to Me unless the Father who sent Me *draws* him" (*emphasis mine*). The Greek verb that is translated "draw" is the word *helko*, which literally means, 'to draw by inward

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, (Thomas Nelson: 1998), p. 380.

power or to pull in.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, we have that verb used on behalf of Jesus referring to one coming to him, namely, the preference is of the person drawing. It has been incorrectly noted that the Father's drawing refers to merely to the *outward call* of the Gospel.<sup>10</sup> That is, the Father draws everyone equally and shows no partiality. However, this notion is seen as false by the second half of the verse. Jesus states, "No one can come to Me unless the Father draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day." Notice that the same individuals who are drawn are the same who are raised up. Unless we are Universalists, we must conclude that who the Father draws he also raises. Dr. James White observes:

The identity of those raised on the last day to eternal life is absolutely co-extensive with the identity of those who are drawn. If a person is drawn, he will also be raised up to eternal life. Obviously, then, it cannot be asserted that Christ, in this context, is saying that the Father is drawing every single individual human being.<sup>11</sup>

Now we should ask ourselves, why would Jesus even make this statement at all? Why would he feel the need to mention this; or why would this be a factor in which he is responding to the Jews about he himself being *The True Bread* that comes from heaven? What purpose should the Holy Spirit have in revealing such a truth to his creatures? These are quite the good questions.

Let us look at the answer this way: Certain truths are evident by particular reports made throughout the entire Bible which illustrate the truths behind the truth, i.e. God's purpose and intention in the affair; similarly to the matter of Joseph and his brother's.<sup>12</sup> In the same manner, we find Jesus making frequent statements in regard to principles to reveal the truth about ambiguous subjects. If our Lord never made this proclamation (and others), it may have been warranted to believe that it would be up to the person to make the choice to come and eat of "*The Bread of Life*." But this is not the case, as Jesus is clearly showing that God's grace is not given to all, lest it *not* be considered grace. John Calvin put it this way:

If this grace were bestowed on all without exception, it would have been unseasonable and inappropriate to have mentioned it in this passage; for we must understand that it was Christ's design to

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<sup>9</sup> TDNT – *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Authorized Version, Ephesians Four Group. Greek Dictionary (electronic ed.).

<sup>10</sup> By "outward call," I mean the audible presentation of the Gospel through the preaching of the Word. By "inward call" I refer to the result of the enlightening influence of the Holy Spirit which compels one to *respond* to God's outward call.

<sup>11</sup> White, James R., *The Potter's Freedom*, (Calvary Press Publishing: 2000), p. 160.

<sup>12</sup> Genesis 50:20

show that not many believe the Gospel, because faith proceeds only from the secret revelation of the Spirit.<sup>13</sup>

If it is God who gives people to Christ, then where can we boast? (Eph. 2:8-10). It is true, however, that God allows us to reap and sow what he has ordained and facilitated. The great Charles Spurgeon once said:

...We certainly find the Lord to be all in all, but we find no hint that the use of means must therefore be dispensed with. The Lord's supreme majesty and power are seen all the more gloriously because He works by means. He is so great that He is not afraid to put honor on the instruments He employs, by speaking of them in high terms and imputing to them great influence.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, he has chosen us to participate in his redemptive plan, yet never to take away the glory that is due to him and him alone.

During this discourse, Jesus even affirms this by saying, that the flesh profits nothing. If we take seriously, what Jesus says about the flesh profiting nothing, and then compare this to the Semi-Pelagius view, we have a serious contradiction. If we, in our flesh, have the ability to make our own choice concerning our own salvation, that is, to be regenerated, then not only does the flesh profit something, but in accordance to our salvation, the flesh profits everything! Thus, a Calvinistic view of this verse, and not a Arminian view, seems to be more faithful to the entire truth of God. It is one thing to disagree with the ancestors of our faith, them being Calvin and company, but far be it from us to oppose the very word of Christ!

If we examine the idea of free will, we may have a better understanding of what Jesus and others really mean. Free will is defined by Jonathan Edwards as "that which the mind chooses any thing;"<sup>15</sup> or, said another way, the ability to make free choices; and no one will dispute that. However, there is a distinction between free will and liberty. Before the fall of man, Augustine defines us as having liberty and free will. After the fall of man, man retained his free will, yet lost his liberty; that is he is still able to make decisions. Originally, mankind was created with the ability to choose good and evil. Though the Bible teaches that after the fall of Adam, man did indeed lose something; this is defined as the loss moral ability. It is written that in Romans 3, "no one seeks after God." And elsewhere in Romans 8:7 that the mind set on the flesh (which is true of all who fell in Adam and have not yet been regenerated) is hostile toward God, for it

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<sup>13</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*; The Comprehensive John Calvin Collection (Ages Digital Library, 1998).

<sup>14</sup> Spurgeon, C. H., *The Soulwinner*, (Whitaker House: 1995), p. 23

<sup>15</sup> Edwards, Jonathan. *The Freedom of the Will*, (Soli Deo Gloria: 1996 reprint), p. 1.

cannot subject itself toward God. Thus, I ask, how then can we accept God if we, in our flesh, are hostile toward him? Likewise, Augustine explained that man does not have the ability to make spontaneous decisions; that is without any prior inclination or disposition, which is a logical impossibility, as it is an effect without a cause. We must ask ourselves, if we make choices apart from any predisposition, can we even make a choice at all. Likewise, it is thought that our wills are innately neutral and we have the ability to choose between good and evil. But, as Augustine emphasized, the only time when we were truly free to do this was before the *Fall*, because then and only then we were not truly inclined toward the parasite (evil), but the host of that evil (good). Thus, the idea of neutrality is a false presupposition because the Bible does teach us that we are inclined toward the other, *which is evil*. It even goes as far as saying that we are dead in sin and willing slaves to sin (Eph. 2:1, etc.). We are described as those who love the darkness. The end result is this: that all choices are made with some prior inclination even down to the minutest decision. If I choose a larger cup of coffee in the morning, I am doing so with a moral implication involved in it. Consequently, we are not able to make decisions apart from our morale (our human nature). Thus, it may be better to state that man has a free agency – to act according to his nature – than to say he has free will.

Therefore, in the end, it is clear what Jesus is saying. He makes the proclamation that man is dead in his sins and is powerless to accept him unless the Holy Spirit regenerates the heart to then give us the motive of wanting to please God, not in our flesh.

Let us move over to a most dynamic example of *predestination*. The book of Romans is one of the greatest theological works that will ever be produced. It has influenced the greatest minds in the history of Christendom. If we briefly examine the contents in this book, we will gain a profound understanding of what God has been saying since Moses penned the book of Genesis. The ninth chapter will be the focus of our attention. Verse 10-16 says:

And not only so; but Rebecca also having conceived by one, even by our father Isaac for the children being not yet born, neither having done anything good or bad, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calls), it was said unto her, The elder shall serve the younger. Even as it is written, Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated. What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid. For he said to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion. So then it is not of him that wills, nor of him that runs, but of God that hath mercy.

First, we recognize that the flesh is *incapable* of hearing God's wisdom without being instantly disturbed by numerous questions, and without demanding a healthier explanation. Therefore, we find that the Apostle, whenever he writes of

some elevated topic of ambiguity, always anticipates the skeptics' refutation. Even today, when men hear anything of what Scripture teaches respecting predestination, he normally becomes uncomfortable. Now, we know that Paul was unfolding the election of Israel and where they are in light of the gospel, but he also consciously gives us a great illustration of God's doctrine of predestination.

Next, I want to now draw our attention to verse 11. Notice the added parentheses; this is to say that Paul was adding something to draw our attention to. Clearly, he is writing on election. He uses the example of two individuals. Not only that, but the individuals were brothers, and to make an even clearer distinction, they were twins. This clears the air for any idea of partiality concerning race, sex, geographical position, and so on (e.g. John 1:13). Paul is making crystal clear that God made a selection according to nothing more than his good pleasure (Eph. 1:4, 11 etc.). Likewise, he mentions more than once that it had nothing to do with works, which eliminates the idea of God foreseeing their efforts. Paul eloquently culminates this discourse by quoting Exodus 33:19 saying, "For he said to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion," and goes on to say that "So then it is not of him that wills, nor of him that runs, but of God that shows mercy" as highlighted.

Therefore, how is it that anyone could conceive of any proposal other than of the one that the Apostle Paul makes so apparent? If we somehow conclude that God is not fair in this event, then we are no longer thinking about *grace* (Rom. 11:6) any longer. To say that God were obligated to show mercy to all is to not recognize the objective of mercy altogether. It is clear that God has chosen to show his love and mercy on who he has decided in the council of his sovereign will. James Montgomery Boice makes this clear saying:

Let us assume the opposite: God's love is regulated by something other than his sovereignty. In that case, God would be regulated by this other thing (whatever it is) and would thus be brought under its power. That is impossible if he is still to be God. In Scripture no cause for God's love other than his electing will is ever given. It is always that 'he destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.'<sup>16</sup>....

This is what the Apostle Paul was saying when he said in Romans 11:5-6:

So too at the present time there is a remnant (a small believing minority), selected (chosen) by grace (by God's unmerited favor

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<sup>16</sup> Boice, James Montgomery, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, (Inter Varsity Press: revised 1986), p. 337.

and graciousness). But if it is by grace (His unmerited favor and graciousness), it is no longer conditioned on works or anything men have done. Otherwise, grace would no longer be grace [it would be meaningless].<sup>17</sup>

God is a just God, and if he were to declare his justice on all men, that would be perfectly fine in his righteousness. But he shows mercy, and in that, he shows it on whom he decides to show it. For it is written in Isaiah 46:10, “Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things which have not been done: Saying, ‘*My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure*’ (emphasis mine).

I would like to add that the same arguments I receive every time I approach this issue with another brother, are the same ones the apostle Paul distinguishes and rebuts in Scripture. What was Paul’s answer? In the conclusion of this teaching he says:

...who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, “Why did you make me like this,” will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use? What if God, although willing to demonstrate his wrath and to make his power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? (Romans 9:20-22).

I want to say this in conclusion that the Bible always and forever will speak for itself; it is God’s word that will eternally stand.<sup>18</sup> We must look through the eyes of the Lord if we are to be able to see ourselves as we really are. There always has been and always will be those who would rather disagree with what the Bible has said on certain issues than to neglect their feelings and traditions and acquiesce to its authority. They cry, “What reason is there to do anything if God has already foreordained all things that happen?” My response is that God uses secondary causes in his eternal plan to bring about what he predestined.

May God help us to see the truth so we may correctly embrace and share it as we have been commanded to do.

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<sup>17</sup> Amplified Bible.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 24:35.

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