



WHEN GRACE COMES HOME

THE PRACTICAL DIFFERENCE THAT CALVINISM MAKES



by



Terry L. Johnson

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Terry Johnson is the Senior Minister of the historic Independent Presbyterian Church in Savannah, Georgia, U.S.A. In 1993 he was named the convenor and then chairman of the PCA General Assembly committee on Psalm-singing. Among the fruit of their labours was the *Trinity Psalter*, of which he was the editor and compiler. He has also published *When Grace Transforms* (ISBN 1 85792 770 2,) looking at the Beatitudes and will soon publish *When Grace Comes Alive* on the Lord's Prayer. He is also author of *The Family Worship Book* (ISBN 1 85792 401 0), a resource book for family devotions (all bar the Psalter published by Christian Focus Publications). He is married to the former Emily Billings and they have five children.

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For Emily





Preface

A United States congressman recently noted that there are two kinds of political conservatives: those who are conservative and *glad* about it, and those who are conservative and *mad* about it. Glad? Oh yes, glad because of all the benefits they see coming from a conservative philosophy of government. Mad? Sorry, yes, there are those too. They are mad about the errant political opinions that are circulating and all the people who hold them. One should have no difficulty guessing which group is more effective in winning others to their point of view, the glad or the mad.



It seems that we have the same problem in the Christian world. There are Christians who are glad about being a Christian. They are overflowing with gratitude for all that they have in Christ. Then there are those who are mad. Their fundamental orientation is not the positive identity and benefits that they have in Christ, but anger at all those who don't share their outlook. They are Christian, but mad about it.

The doctrines of grace are something to be glad about. We readily admit that there are plenty of reasons for being mad. The world's philosophy destroys marriages, families, and communities. Its moral and religious relativism has broken down the marriage covenant, encouraged promiscuity, abortion, illegitimacy, single-parent households, and given us a generation of angry, alienated, and violent children. If one is a Reformed Christian there is additional material for anger coming





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out of the Christian community. How many people are robbed of their peace because other Christians persuade them they can have no eternal security? How many are devastated by affliction because they've been taught that God isn't sovereign? How many are trapped in the emotional turmoil of unworkable 'higher life' views of sanctification? When one soberly considers the net impact that deviant philosophies and religions have upon human misery there is much to be angry about. Yes there is, but should anger be our dominant, our characteristic mood?

In our polemics with unbelievers and believers alike we mustn't forget that the message of God's sovereign grace in Christ is 'good news', it is gospel. The following book attempts to demonstrate that believing those doctrines is something to be glad about. In one practical area after another, the message of grace fully understood takes us to the highest heights of peace, comfort, thanksgiving, and joy that it is possible to reach in this world. I invite you to walk along those heights with me.

A word of caution before you proceed: even a book of 'practical divinity' needs to demonstrate its Biblical basis. The first two chapters provide that basis, and for this reason are a tougher read than the rest of the book. Persevere. They are necessary if the rest is to have the impact that it should. What impact? The impact for which I pray is that readers would learn afresh the delights of the Reformed faith, that they would be glad not mad, and more effective in bringing others to the same convictions.





Introduction

Background reading: Romans 11:33-36



We are going to take a journey into the land of practical ‘divinity’, as the old theologians called it. Specifically, we will endeavor to look at the practical difference the Calvinistic understanding of Biblical teaching makes. During our journey, I will use the designations ‘Reformed’ and ‘Calvinistic’ interchangeably with ‘Biblical’, ‘Bible-believing’, and ‘Gospel’, for, like Spurgeon, I regard the former as synonymous with the latter. ‘It is a nickname to call it Calvinism,’ said Mr Spurgeon, ‘Calvinism is the gospel and nothing else.’¹ You understand, then, that, for us, this is not a sectarian thing but a gospel thing. If you do not share this perspective, please do not take offence. Read on, we plead, for there is much here that we trust will be edifying for your soul as well.

What prompts us to begin this journey? Most of Protestantism looks back to founders who were essentially Calvinistic in their beliefs. This is true of the Episcopal or Anglican community (e.g., Cranmer, Ridley, Latimer, Hooper), the Lutheran churches (Luther himself), the Congregational churches (e.g., Owen, Goodwin, Ames, Cotton, Hooker), the Baptist churches (e.g., Roger Williams, and all five ‘founders’ of the

1. *C. H. Spurgeon, Autobiography* Vol. 1: The Early Years, 1834–1859, Banner of Truth, 1962 (1897–1900), 168



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Southern Baptist Convention), and above all, the Reformed and Presbyterian churches (e.g., Calvin, Beza, Knox). Even the Roman Catholics revere Augustine as the greatest of the church theologians, and on many of the matters with which we will be concerned, the ‘Calvinists’ were at one with him. Yet for all this consensus, there is little understanding of the tradition or its practical importance. This is a source of frustration and regret for me, because I personally stand as one who has been profoundly touched by the practical implications of Calvinism, and deeply longs for others to drink from its satisfying wells. Yet in the popular mind, insofar as anything at all is understood about them, Calvinism’s doctrines are regarded as irrelevant theological abstractions without any practical relevance at all.

What exactly will we be talking about? I won’t try now to present the whole system of doctrine. For those wishing to review its contents, I refer you to the *Westminster Confession of Faith With Scripture Proofs*. For our purposes I will focus in on three cardinal doctrines, which shall serve as the focus for the first leg of our journey.

Our sovereign God

First, *the sovereignty of God*. If there is one doctrine for which Calvinism is known, it is this one. The Bible, say the Calvinists, teaches that God rules over all of creation, over all of history, decreeing and determining, in the words of the Shorter Catechism, ‘whatsoever comes to pass.’ Joseph can look back at his wretched circumstances when his brothers sold him into slavery and say ‘God meant it for good’ (Gen. 50:20). God says through Isaiah, ‘I am ... the One forming light *and* darkness, causing well-being *and* calamity, I am the Lord who does *all these*’ (Isa. 45:7). He works ‘*all things* after the counsel of his will’ (Eph. 1:11). He ‘causes *all things* to work together

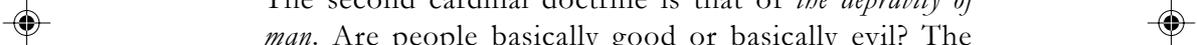


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for good' (Rom. 8:28). There are no exceptions to this. Sparrows don't fall out of trees and hairs don't fall out of heads apart from His will (Matt. 10:29, 30). Everything is controlled and determined by God. Including evil? In one sense yes, in another no. God is not the author of evil, but neither is evil running loose in God's universe outside of His sovereign purposes. Even the crucifixion, that most evil of all human deeds, was said by Peter at Pentecost to be carried out by the 'predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God' (Acts 2:23). The early church said that Herod and Pilate and the rest did whatever God's hand and purpose 'predestined to occur' (Acts 4:28).

Every atom of existence is under the direct control of God. There is not even 'one maverick molecule,' as R. C. Sproul says.² Everything is under the control of God.

Human depravity



The second cardinal doctrine is that of *the depravity of man*. Are people basically good or basically evil? The Christian church has historically said that people are by nature evil. Within Christendom, there is no theological perspective so pessimistic about human nature as that of Augustine and Calvin. Historically we have used the terminology of 'total depravity' to describe the human condition, meaning by it that people are corrupted, poisoned, and anti-God in all their faculties. Again, using the language of the Westminster Standards:

(Man) is utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite unto all that is spiritually good, and wholly inclined to all evil and that continually (*Larger Catechism* Q. 25).

Is the Bible really as negative about humanity as this

2. R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God*, Tyndale, p. 27.



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indicates? Survey the Scriptures. God said of man in the days of Noah that ‘every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually’ (Gen. 6:5). Through Jeremiah he says of the human heart, ‘The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?’ (Jer. 17:9). In Ecclesiastes we read, ‘... the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil, and insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives’ (Eccles. 9:3). Paul, in Romans, quotes the Psalms in saying, ‘as it is written, “there is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one” ’ (Rom. 3:10-12). Jesus said simply, ‘men loved the darkness rather than the light’ (John 3:19, 20). The problem is deep within us, in our desires, in our natures, in our loves and hates. Thus, we may summarize with Paul’s ultimate metaphor, man is ‘dead in his trespasses and sins’ (Eph. 2:1-3). He is dead to good. He is dead to God. He is helpless, hopeless, and hellish.

Sovereign grace

Third, *the sovereignty of grace*. This follows necessarily from the previous two points. Man is so incapacitated by sin that unless God acts to rescue him nothing will happen. He will remain dead and blind. Thus the doctrine of the sovereignty of God, plus that of the depravity of man, leads us inexorably to the doctrine of *sovereign grace*. We cannot live spiritually unless we are born ‘of God’ or ‘of the Spirit’ (John 1:13; 3:8). We remain dead unless we are ‘made alive’ with Christ (Eph. 2:5). We cannot come to Him unless He ‘draws’ us (John 6:44). We cannot choose Him unless He chooses us (John 15:16). We cannot love Him unless he first loves us (1 John 4:19). We cannot believe Him unless He gives us faith (Eph. 2:8, 9). If we are to be saved God must sovereignly do it. ‘By His doing

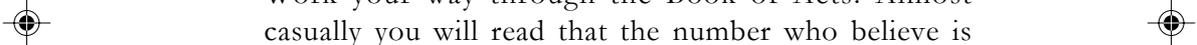


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you are in Christ Jesus,' Paul writes (1 Cor. 1:31). Salvation is 'of the Lord' (Jonah 2:9).

Who benefits from this sovereign and gracious intervention by God? Not all (or all would be saved), but some, specifically, those who are chosen. In the language of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*,

By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death (III.3).



Calvin called this the *decretum horrible*. In the language of Scripture, 'He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world... In love He predestined us' (Eph. 1:4, 5). 'Well, that is just an isolated text,' you say. No, it would be truer to say that it is found on every page of Scripture. Work your way through the Book of Acts. Almost casually you will read that the number who believe is the same as the number whom 'the Lord shall call to Himself' (2:39); that God Himself 'adds' to the number of the church (2:47); that God Himself 'grants' repentance (5:31, 11:18); that the Lord 'opens' the heart (16:14); and most blatantly we read, 'as many as were ordained to eternal life believed' (13:48).

Turn to the Epistles. 'God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation,' Paul tells the Thessalonians (2 Thess. 2:13). He has 'saved us,' he tells Timothy,

... and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity (2 Tim. 1:9).

We could go on (and on!) but I think the point has been made. God is sovereign and grace is sovereignly dispensed.



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If you're not convinced, we'll see overwhelming evidence in the pages ahead. Stay tuned.

Responses

Does this sound like 'good news' to you? For me, there is none better. Yet many react negatively. Let me summarize two such responses.

First, *those who aren't familiar with the Bible or sure that they believe it typically recoil in horror*. For them, the God described above is a monster. God, they would say, insofar as we know anything about Him, is kindly and good, but passively watching and remote. He doesn't control, and certainly doesn't predestinate anything. Moreover, for the unfamiliar and unbelieving, man is good. He may be misled by corruptions in his environment, but he is essentially benevolent. And man is paramount. Man's freedom, man's accomplishments, man's potentials are the name of the game for them, and both Calvinism's God and Calvinism's man assault their ambition for autonomous humanity.

Second, *even among Bible-believing Christians there is alarm*. This would especially be true of the many evangelical believers who are unaccustomed to thinking theologically. They don't *like* to think theologically. Their great question is 'what difference does it make?' If they can't see how it makes a difference in their lives they aren't interested. Now this is noteworthy because normally evangelical and fundamentalist types are fond of saying that they believe the whole Bible. But show them that 'predestination-stuff', *right there in the Bible*, and they become strangely silent and uninterested. The discussion moves on.

In fact, when evangelical believers hear about the sovereignty of God, the depravity of man, and the sovereignty of grace, many are almost as horrified as the persons described above. They'll counter such talk with





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strong affirmations about ‘free-will’, a term not found in the Bible, and ‘whosoever will may come’, a phrase not found in the Bible. They may say, as I was told in the church of my youth, ‘we don’t know what it means, but it doesn’t mean *that*.’

This would even be true of many members of Presbyterian and Reformed churches. They may say that they believe their creeds and confessions and catechisms. But when this subject of election is brought up they, too, begin to grumble about ‘what difference’ it all makes, and how ‘you’ll get into heaven whether you understand that or not,’ and how the important thing to do is to get on with the job of winning souls! All this theology is getting in the way of evangelism! We need to quit speculating and get on with preaching the gospel.

Does it make a difference? We are convinced that it does, and that it is vital that God’s people understand the practical difference Calvinism makes. These doctrines are not just the theoretical musings of ivory-tower theologians. They are not just abstractions unconnected to life. They are central. They are vital. They are crucial to the living of life.

How so? Few seem to realize that these theological truths have shaped whole peoples and civilizations. Americans, of all people, ought to understand this. The nation was founded primarily by English Puritans, beginning at Plymouth Rock. Even though many other groups followed, their legacy was enduring. Among the other groups that did come to the American colonies, 85% of the population at the time of the American Revolution were of the Calvinistic heritage, being either English Puritans, Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, Dutch Reformed, German Reformed, or French Huguenot.³ What is their legacy? Such vital principles as the rule of law, due process, freedom of religion, democracy, limited government,

3. Sidney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, Yale, 1972, p. 350.



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free markets, a strong work ethic, stress upon education (Harvard was founded only a few years after the colony was established). All of these principles and points of emphasis flow directly from Calvinistic religion.⁴ No wonder one German historian could call Calvin ‘the virtual founder of America.’⁵

Contemporary Christians ought also to understand it. The Calvinistic church has stood for representative government (in the electing of elders), for congregational participation in worship and congregational singing, for the centrality of the preached word, for the laity receiving communion in both kinds, for justification by faith alone, for the new birth and revival, not exactly a list of irrelevant items, many of which have been accepted even by Roman Catholics in their Vatican II reforms. Calvinism has played a vital role in giving both the modern world and the contemporary church their current shape.

But instead of looking at the institutional dimension (much as I would love to and may in the future), we will focus on the practical difference Calvinism makes in matters of personal piety, things such as assurance, humility, adversity, guidance, prayer, sanctification, and a thing we’ll call ‘outlook.’ We will see the difference the doctrines of grace make right where we live and act and walk. Hopefully you’ll never again need to ask, ‘what difference does it make?’

‘My people perish for their lack of knowledge,’ God warns through Hosea (Hos. 4:16). This surely has been our problem. We have not had the patience to wrestle with the great truths. We have deliberately avoided certain doctrines. The result? The same result that occurs whenever one deliberately refuses any part of God’s revelation of Himself. We suffer. We lose. Our souls don’t receive the nourishment that that doctrine supplies. Our personalities are warped by that omission. Paul taught

4. see Douglas Kelly, *The Emergence of Liberty in the Modern World*, P&R, 1992.

5. Paul Carlson, *Our Presbyterian Heritage*, David C. Cook Publishing Co., 1973. The historian was Leopold von Ranke.



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‘the whole counsel of God’ because we need it all (Acts 20:27). If we didn’t need a part of it, God would not have revealed it to us. Since He did, we can’t go around saying, ‘It’s too hard,’ or ‘It’s too theological.’ Apply your minds. ‘Come let us reason together,’ the Lord says (Isa. 1:18).

This is what we intend to do in the pages ahead. I believe that the result will be a much expanded knowledge of God for most. With that will come a clearer understanding of life as well.

