

DOCTRINES OF GRACE 1

Introduction to The Doctrines of Grace

Why is this subject important?

The Bible is a book about salvation. It gives us clear teaching about the method of this salvation because it is vital that all Christians understand what God has done for them so that he might have all the glory. The scriptural view is that salvation is *all* of God. Man is in a hopeless condition by nature. Without God reaching down to save him, he would be utterly lost.

Not everyone professing faith believes this. Many Christians are cloudy on the method of salvation. The crux of the matter is: **to what degree is man able to save himself?** There are various views.

Universalism

This is the view that everyone will be saved. Christ becomes simply a good example of mankind. His death is tragic.

Pelagianism

believes that man can save himself. He can determine his future for good (i.e. self determinism), he can reach God by his own efforts.

Arminianism

is a sort of *semi-Pelagianism*. It teaches that man co-operates with God, who provides grace, but man chooses and makes the first move towards salvation. God doesn't definitely save anyone, but provides a potential salvation and leaves it up to man to grasp it for himself. Of course, the corollary of this is that man can fall from grace if he does not continue in faith. This view is more or less official in Roman Catholicism and Methodism, but it has recently become common amongst Evangelical Christians. Probably the most famous Christian advocate of this theology was John Wesley.

Calvinism or Reformed Theology

is the belief that salvation is wholly of the Lord. Man is lost in sin and cannot save himself. The death of Jesus is a penal substitute for man's sin, he died in man's place. This death definitely saves a specific number of people, called the elect, who are predestined by God to be the Bride of Christ. Those who are called by God are then justified, sanctified and glorified; as such they can never fall away. God is their Father, he will never fail them, though he will discipline them. This has been the historic Christian viewpoint for hundreds of years. It was the view of Paul, Augustine and codified in the Reformation by Martin Luther and more fully by John Calvin. It is represented in all the major historic Christian creeds and confessions (e.g: the Westminster and Belgic Confessions). It was the doctrine of the Puritans and the 39 Articles of the Church of England. It was championed by the giants of history like Whitefield and Charles Spurgeon, and more recently by Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones.

Man in control



God in control

Universalism No salvation necessary

Pelagianism Man saves himself

Arminianism Man initiates a salvation provided by God

Calvinism God is totally in control of salvation man is dead / unable

Historical Overview

There has always been a vociferous debate centred upon the equal truths of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility in salvation. The Bible states both. God provides salvation sovereignly. He predestines, calls and gives grace. Man is responsible for his sins, he is to act righteously and is ordered to repent; yet, he is unable in his natural strength to do either. Some have felt that responsibility must imply ability, yet the Bible clearly shows that natural man is totally unable to act right or even respond to the Gospel without grace. Where is free will in all of this?

Early church

The early church fathers had various debates on these matters, seeking to overcome philosophical influences from the Greek and Roman world. The first major conflict was between Augustine and a British monk called Pelagius. Augustine argued that the will of man is bound as regards salvation. The Fall has rendered man depraved and unable to rise above sin. God's grace is supreme in salvation and man cannot add his own efforts to it. Pelagius was originally orthodox, but became convinced that man's responsibility required ability of free will to choose salvation. In other words, man's will is neutral, not bound. In his system sin was watered down and the effects of the Fall eradicated. Men can avoid sin even without Christ. The will, not grace was supreme. [In the 19th century, CG Finney developed a very similar view.]

The Reformation

Augustine's view became the accepted church position, but as the years went by, the churches drifted into Pelagianism in practice. At the time of the Reformation, the matter came to a head. Martin Luther, God's vessel for initiating the Reformation, wrote a book explaining that the will is totally bound regarding choice to serve God; but free in daily choices on ordinary issues. Our sinful state has ruined us from initiating our salvation, God must reach down and save us or we perish. Again the Protestant churches took up this position, which all the Reformers and Reformed creeds and confessions accepted. The Reformation was about much more, especially justification by faith alone, but the key issue is that it exalted God's position in salvation in line with his word.

Arminius and the Remonstrants

Later, a Dutchman called Jacobus Hermann (known to us from the Latin as Jacob or James Arminius - at that time scholars used Latin names and wrote in Latin) revived the concerns of Pelagius. He focused mainly upon the question of the sovereign grace of God in salvation, and taught that God decrees to save all who repent, believe and persevere, i.e. God does not choose anyone specifically, but foresees those who will choose him. In 1610 (one year after Arminius' death) his followers took these issues further and set forth their views in a document called '*Remonstrance*' (i. e. protest, this led to them being called *Remonstrants*). This contained five main points:

- God elects people on the basis of foreseen faith or unbelief.
- Christ died for all men, loves all men, but only believers are saved.
- Man is so depraved that grace is necessary for faith or good deeds.
- But this grace may be resisted.
- Whether all who believe persevere to the end is uncertain.

Further drift

Later these doctrines were developed further to emphasise man's role in salvation -

- the will is one of the causes of regeneration
- faith is a good work of man
- man can fall away from grace
- Christ's righteousness is not imputed to a believer
- men can become perfect
- Adam's guilt is not imputed to men
- there is no assurance of salvation in this life.

Present day Remonstrants are Pelagians and also have a low view of inspiration and the Trinity. Some of the Remonstrants were led further astray and denied the deity of Jesus and the Holy Spirit (e.g: Simon Episcopus). Others developed a governmental theory of the atonement (e.g: Hugo Grotius) which denies that Jesus' death paid the penalty of sin. (How could it if he died for everyone, or everyone would be saved?) Somehow, Jesus' death permits the Father to forgive all who repent and believe. Jesus death is no longer essential because God is so loving, it was simply the means he used.

The Synod of Dort

To respond to the Remonstrants' five articles, Reformed theologians convened a synod at Dort (or more fully, Dordrecht in the south of The Netherlands) in 1618-19. As well as 62 Dutch representatives, there were 24 international delegates. They condemned the Remonstrant articles and removed the Remonstrant ministers, who were seen to have adopted a semi-Pelagian view of grace and had destroyed assurance and God's sovereignty in salvation.

The conclusions of the Synod were set out in the Canons of Dort in four chapters on: sovereign predestination, definite atonement, radical depravity, effectual grace and the perseverance of God with the saints. (The third and fourth of the five Calvinistic points were combined in one chapter.) There were also a number of articles. From this document grew the famous five points of Calvinism which were popularly known under the mnemonic Tulip i.e:

Total Depravity
Unconditional Election
Limited Atonement
Irresistible Grace
Perseverance of the Saints

The reformed view of the doctrines of grace was taken up by the Church of England (notably: Cranmer, Tyndale, Ridley and Latimer) and later was particularly championed by the Puritans, Presbyterians and many Baptists. In America it flowered with Jonathan Edwards and later Charles and Archibald Hodge, BB Warfield, RL Dabney etc. In Holland it spawned theologians like Bavinck and Kuyper (who became Prime Minister). Many

famous preachers espoused this view, for instance: Charles Spurgeon, Samuel Rutherford, John Newton and JC Ryle. It also prompted many missionaries beginning with William Carey.

Essential Points of Doctrine

A proper foundation

In order to understand what the Bible teaches, we must apply sound rules of interpretation. False teaches can make scripture say anything at all. To avoid this we must look at all the relevant verses on a given subject and study them in context, not in isolation. We must properly evaluate the meaning of words and their place in a sentence. We must explain obscure texts in the light of clear ones. We must interpret figures of speech according to their nature, e.g: not apply metaphors literally; and so on.

Some Biblical statements seem to contradict one another. There are various ways that this problem has been dealt with. Some ignore the contradiction and side with one or the other (e. g. emphasising human responsibility). Others try to harmonise the two extremes by advocating a middle view, a compromise, thus weakening both teachings. Yet others teach both extremes by explaining them as paradoxes (apparent but not real contradictions) but their application can make them inconsistent. One day they teach an Arminian message, the next day they preach a Calvinistic one. This will not strengthen the church.

The way forward is to understand the plan of God first, then confusing doctrines can be placed in that system, even if not fully understood by our finite minds. Having understood this, we teach doctrines that the Bible teaches in the way the Bible emphasises them. Some difficulties solved in this way include:

- God is one, yet also three persons.
- Man is responsible, yet man is unable.
- God is sovereign in salvation yet man is also responsible for his own sins.
- The kingdom is here now, but it is not yet fully consummated.
- Jesus is fully God and yet fully man.
- Death and evil are overcome yet still reign.
- Christians are said to be glorified, yet they will be glorified at a later stage.
- Christians are righteous in Christ, yet they still sin.

All these can be explained within a system that follows Biblical teaching. We all have a system whether we call it one or not. What is necessary is that we develop a system that is Biblical. Great minds have struggled with this for centuries and there are only two Christian options available:

- God is in total control of salvation, a *monergistic* system (Calvinism).
- God is partially in control but man initiates and co-operates in various ways, a *synergistic* (Greek: *synergos*, 'working together') system (Arminianism).

These two systems cannot be mixed, they are mutually incompatible. We have to choose one or the other. Some have developed systems which claim to be a *via media* between Calvinism and Arminianism (like Amyraldianism - see later study) but they still fall into the second category, a synergism, though not as severe as Arminianism.

Power to save

Why does God tell man he must repent if he cannot without grace? Why does the Bible say that you must be born again if only God can regenerate? A key to understanding why God says certain things, which seem impossible, is seen in the ministry of Jesus.

In his ministry, Jesus continually commanded men to do the impossible. He tells a man with a withered arm to put out his hand. He tells a dead Lazarus to come forth out of the tomb. He tells a crippled man to walk. All of these people obeyed. The word of Jesus, applied by the Holy Spirit, imparted power to those it was intended (not everyone at the Pool of Siloam were healed).

Similarly, the Gospel message contains power (Rm 1:16). It brings life to the elect. An elect sinner hearing that he must repent and be born again receives grace to believe and turn towards God. A sinner not chosen by God hears the same message and is hardened in sin. A theology that eradicates this supernatural element and reduces it down to a human level is unbiblical. [This will be further explained in later studies.]

The crucial element behind the whole controversy is this: is God sovereign or not? With this in mind, we now compare the two systems of Arminianism and Calvinism.

Total Depravity

Arminianism:

Men are not affected by Adam's sin and can respond to the Gospel of their own free will. Everyone who hears the Gospel can receive grace and power to be regenerated.

Calvinism:

Man is born in sin and under the wrath of God. As such he is unable to respond to the Gospel in his own strength. Righteousness is impossible.

Eph 2:1-3; Rm 9:15-16; Jn 1:12-13

Unconditional Election

Arminianism:

God elects (chooses) those whom he foresees will have faith.

Calvinism:

God chooses (selects) according to his good pleasure. It is an act of sovereign love and is not dependent upon any condition met by the individual. Election is the origin point of salvation, the source of calling, faith and repentance. God did not need to choose anyone, but he shows his mercy by electing a remnant of fallen humanity.

Acts 13:48; Rm 9:11-13; Eph 1:4-5; 1 Cor 1:26-27; 1 Tim 1:9

Limited Atonement (Particular Redemption)

Arminianism:

Christ died for all men. Everyone can be saved if they believe. Christ's blood is, therefore, ineffective for those who fail to believe.

Calvinism:

Christ died for his people, a specific group given to him in eternity by the Father as a Bride. These are the elect, those for whom Christ's blood is fully effectual.

Matt 20:28 (many but not all); **Jn 17:2,6,10,11; Acts 20:28**

Irresistible Grace (Effectual Calling)

Arminianism:

Man can successfully resist God's grace. His will is free to believe or not.

Calvinism:

There is an effectual call for some within the outward, general call of the Gospel. The Holy

Spirit works in the hearts of the elect through the call of the Gospel to impart a power to believe and repent. He regenerates the heart, brings conviction of sin and a desire to believe in Christ for mercy - in these people only.

Jn 6:37, 44-45, 65; Rm 8:29-30; Eph 2:4-5, 8; Titus 3:5

Final Perseverance of the saints

Arminianism:

One can never be sure of one's salvation and it is possible to fall away from grace and be lost if one does not continue in faith.

Calvinism:

Man cannot continue in faith by his own strength at all, God must work in him to complete the work. This grace is continued to the end.

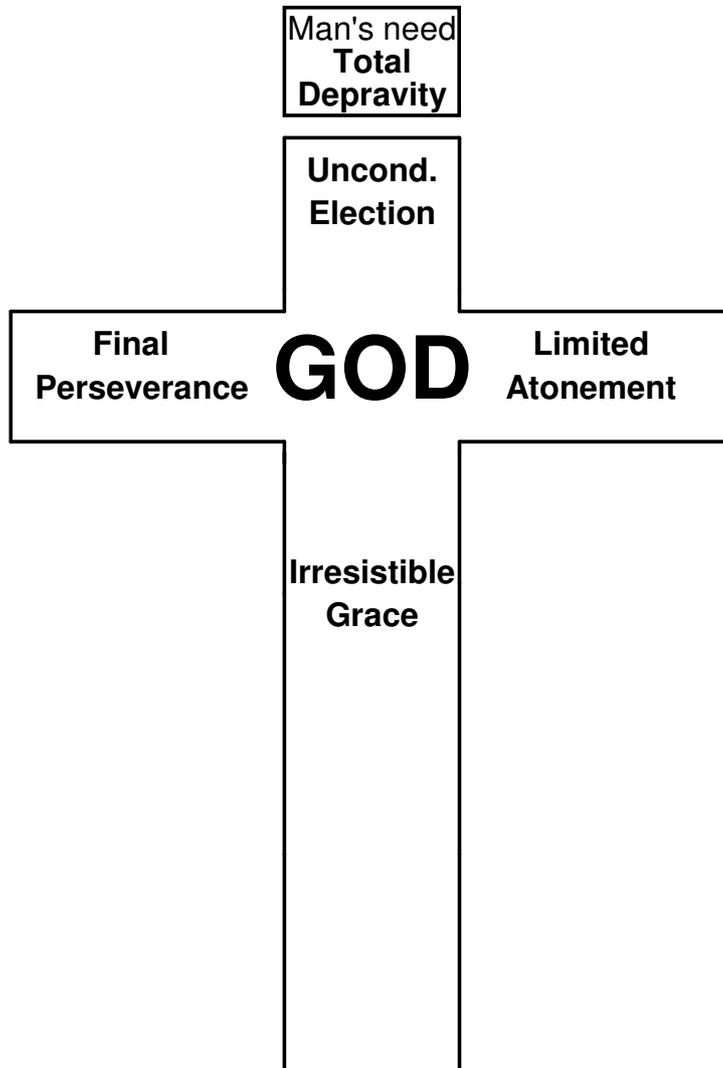
Jn 4 :14, 10:27-28; Rm 5:9-10; Phil 1:6; 1 Pt 1:5

These five points (Tulip) are not the whole scope of Calvinism, but they do form the essential core of the Doctrines of Grace and the argument against Arminianism. These doctrines are crucial to a proper understanding and experience of the Christian life. If these are not properly understood, your walk will falter and you will be unable to combat other errors effectively. Historically, those that have yielded to an unbiblical view of these, have later succumbed to even worse errors. The issues here control your views on: God, sin, salvation, man, providence, grace and your daily walk. Is God in control of your life or not? One system declares that there is a God who saves, the other speaks of a God who helps man to save himself and then leaves him to fend for himself. One theology gives all the praise to God for salvation, the other divides the glory between God and man.

The five points of each system hang together. You cannot take bits of one and bits of another without being inconsistent. They both result from a specific conception of God's decrees. It is folly and misleading to be an Arminian regarding conversion, but a Calvinist regarding perseverance; i. e. man saves himself but God keeps him. A commitment to part of one commits you to the whole unless you are happy to be theologically inconsistent. The important issue is: what does the Bible teach?

It is no novelty, then, that I am preaching; no new doctrine. I love to proclaim these strong old doctrines, that are called by the nickname CALVINISM, but which are surely and verily the revealed truth of God as it is in Christ Jesus.

C. H. Spurgeon (From a sermon on 2 Thess 2:13-14, 'Election')



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