

TRUTHWALK: November 27, 2011

TRINITY FELLOWSHIP CHURCH

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WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

(From *The Practical Implications of Calvinism*, by A. N. Martin) “Benjamin B. Warfield describes Calvinism as ‘that sight of the majesty of God that pervades all of life and all of experience.’ In particular as it relates to the doctrine of salvation its glad confession is summarized in those three pregnant words, *God saves sinners.*”

This statement, taken alone, is a sweeping expression of the difference being persuaded of the doctrines of grace makes: It “pervades all of life and all of experience.” We had a taste of this in the very first session of this series. John Roberts, referring to the subject of total depravity, or radical and pervasive depravity, told us that first link in the chain, so to speak, radically affects all of life, and he went on to enumerate some of the specifics. He did that so well, in fact, that I’d be foolish to try to improve on his description. (Read John’s preamble.)

Obviously, we can’t discuss each of these in detail, so what I’d like to do this morning is to consider several ways in which the doctrines of grace make a difference, beginning with a personal observation. I grew up in a pastor’s home, and was taught from as early as I can remember to love and honor God. However, my father pastored in a denomination that was Wesleyan, Arminian and dispensational. As a result, I believed both that I had something to do with my salvation (“I took Jesus as my Savior—you take him too”), and that I could lose my salvation. As a pretty young child, I can recall fearing that the Lord would return at a moment in time when I was not walking with him, with the accompanying dread of spending eternity in hell. This had the effect of keeping my conscience alert to my sin (something that should probably be more true these many years later), but it left me essentially joyless in the faith. God was to be feared, to be sure, but I didn’t get much beyond that. The notion of loving God, and of being loved by him, was difficult to embrace, no matter how many times we sang “Jesus Loves Me” in Sunday school. So for me, one of the ways grace has made a difference is to bring me to an understanding that one can know he is saved, and that in turn has introduced me to the joy of being a believer in Christ.

Another of the ways these truths have made a difference is in how I interpret so-called ordinary events of life. Here’s an example: my son-in-law Aaron has recently changed jobs—actually changed careers.... Were it not for seeing God’s hand in the details, he might (we might) have been tempted to see this as an instance of terribly unfortunate timing. As it is, he sees it as the Lord’s way of keeping his heart from becoming

attached to a position, prestige and a higher salary. He is free, as a result, to pursue a career in which his heart feels much more alive and in which he can serve the Lord and his people more directly than in the halls of Congress. This is a healthy and godly perspective.

Another story? Chad in Iowa...

All of this is about one concept, the idea that we have a sovereign God. From Terry Johnson's book, *When Grace Comes Home: How the Doctrines of Grace Change Your Life* (provided to me by Bruce Bradford), "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.'" The two examples I've given you are illustrations of this, and your life abounds with evidence that God is sovereign over all he has made, if only you are alert to it. Johnson again:

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 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).

When we see life through this lens, the impact is obvious and dramatic. Why, for example, did you decide to take a different route home that day last week? You made the choice, but it was guided by God, and it may be that you avoided an accident in so doing. Why do you have the boss you do, or why do you look the way you do? Why were you born into the family you were, and in the location you were? It is all part of God's sovereign decree. Nothing happens outside his will, and his purposes will be accomplished through everything that happens.

The sovereignty of God is seen in how we approach prayer. From Philip Graham Ryken (*What Is a True Calvinist?*), "It is sometimes thought that God's sovereignty inhibits prayer. If God has already decided what he is going to do, the argument goes, and nothing that we can do will change what he has planned from all eternity, then why should we pray? It won't make any difference anyway, so why bother?"

“The flaw in this argument should be immediately evident to anyone who knows the Lord’s Prayer, for Jesus taught us to pray, ‘Your will be done’ (Matt. 6:10). In prayer we surrender our will to God’s will. **Prayer is not a way of getting God to do what we want him to do; rather, it is a way of submitting to God’s will in all things.**

Furthermore, the sovereignty of God proves to be absolutely essential to the efficacy of prayer, for only a sovereign God has the power to answer” (emphasis added). Again from Ryken’s book, “As J. I. Packer observed, ‘The Calvinist is the Christian who confesses before men in his theology just what he believes in his heart before God when he prays.’” The point is, why pray to a being who may or may not be able to answer? And if God’s will is bound by mine—i.e. if he can only answer in ways that I might be able to imagine—then what is the need of him? He graciously allows us to participate in causality through prayer (why should not prayer be an agent of causing things to happen any less than our direct actions?) and he reserves the right to answer in ways that are better than we could ask or think (Eph. 3:20).

This matter of prayer leads to another practical implication of Calvinism. In the words of A. N. Martin, “what is prayer in the last analysis? It is a conscious spreading out of my helplessness before God.” This, then, should serve as an aid to humility, and it goes along with recognition of our depravity. If I really believe I am what the Bible says, a depraved sinner with no ability to save myself, and if I really believe God “is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see” (1 Tim. 6:16), then who am I to be anything but humble in his presence? From Terry Johnson’s *When Grace Comes Home*, “If one who has grasped the meaning of the doctrines of grace is proud, he is not a true Calvinist. He may have accepted a philosophy that resembles Calvinism. He may have been converted to a Reformed way of life, or a Reformed ‘world and life view’, but he is not a Calvinist. A true Calvinist is one who has been born again by the Spirit of God, who has seen his personal filth and corruption, who has fled to Christ, and knows better than anyone that it is only by the grace of God that he is saved. He has nothing to boast in. He has nothing to be proud about.”

If I may be allowed a brief digression, the fact that humility should be a hallmark of Calvinists doesn’t mean it always is. In his book which I have already referenced, Philip Ryken has this to say: “(S)o many of those who have discovered the beauty of Reformed theology are anything but beautiful themselves. People sometimes speak of ‘TRs,’ meaning those who are ‘Truly Reformed.’ But what this term brings to mind is usually not very nice (some people have the same instinctive response to the term ‘Calvinist’). The ‘Truly Reformed’ are considered narrow in their thinking, parochial in their outlook, and uncharitable in their attitude toward those who disagree. They have a bad reputation—and, sadly, perhaps some of it is deserved.

“There is a combative streak in Calvinism, and whenever the doctrines of grace ... are divorced from warm Christian piety, people tend to get ornery. Some Christians who identify themselves as Calvinists seem to be in a perpetual state of discontent with their pastors, often making uninvited suggestions for their personal improvement. Others seem overly concerned with converting people to their ecclesiastical denomination. Still others have memorized TULIP ... but somehow seem to be missing the heart of the gospel....

“This ought not to be. In fact, it *cannot* be, provided that Calvinism is rightly understood. The doctrines of grace help to preserve all that is right and good in the Christian life: humility, holiness, and thankfulness, with a passion for prayer and evangelism. The true Calvinist ought to be the most outstanding Christian—not narrow and unkind, but grounded in God’s grace and therefore generous of spirit.”

Having considered, however inadequately, the difference the doctrines of Grace should make in how we interpret “ordinary” events, in humility, and in prayer—and realizing there are innumerable other ways these doctrines need to make a difference—I want us to look at worship before opening this up to your comments and questions. A. N. Martin writes, in his booklet, *The Practical Implications of Calvinism*, of “a passage of Scripture in which we have a historical account of how God makes a Calvinist.” He then turns to the well-known passage in Isaiah 6, the experience of the prophet when he had the vision of God on his throne, and was completely undone by it. Martin says Isaiah was brought “to a vision of the majesty of God that so affected him that his life was never the same again.... In the first place, *it brought a deep experimental acquaintance with his own sinfulness....* (T)his was Isaiah, from all indication in the record of Scripture a holy man, a man of God, what would be termed a dedicated Christian. But he had yet to have a sight and vision of the Lord that shattered him and shook him and exposed the inherent corruption of his own heart and life. And I submit that God never makes Calvinists by displaying to them his glory and his majesty without bringing with it this commensurate exposure of sin in the light of his sovereignty and his holiness.”

Obviously much more could be said about this, but suffice to say for now that a deep and lasting sense of the holiness of God, similar to what Isaiah experienced, should be common to those of us who know and love the doctrines of Grace. It has been said that the tendency to worship is part of the human condition. That we are worshippers is hard to deny; the question is what (or Whom) we worship. While the psalmist lamented that the nations worshiped the work of their hands (see Psalm 115), our generation is no less idolatrous, but it may be said we worship ourselves. In either case, what is worshipped is in no way deserving of worship, but only results in the worshiper becoming like the object worshiped. By contrast, the worship of the one and only God brings the happy result of becoming like the One we worship (2 Cor. 3:18—“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same

image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”)

Commenting on the same subject—worship—Terry Johnson has this to say: “Only when I truly understand the depth of my own depravity, my utter helplessness, and the sovereign, initiating love of God, can I understand the immensity of the grace of God. No other system of theology so abases man. No other says that man is so foul and helpless. No other, as a result, says that God has done so much to save us. The two go hand in hand. The greater man’s need, the greater must be God’s grace. When a child of God understands this, he is humbled. He bows. He who is forgiven much loves much (Luke 7:47)....

“Where does a true comprehension of the doctrines of grace lead us? To our knees in worship. Perhaps one reason why so few are motivated to worship God with fervor is that we have reduced God to a slightly larger version of ourselves....

“What practical difference does Calvinism make?... It will make you into a worshiper. When you come to realize that the God who is there is not subject to your desires, that He is sovereign over your eternity, and when you realize the greatness of His mercy and grace, you will begin to long for genuine worship, worship that prostrates you and exalts God.”