

The Brown Street Beacon

*"...Shine out among them like beacon lights,
holding out to them the Word of Life" (Phil 2:15-16)*



Volume 3

July 26, 2015

Number. 23

Grace and Permissiveness

Dale Smelser

There is cause for concern in some current ideas premised upon the grace of God. What persons with such ideas are saying of grace per se is often fine, but their projected applications are unjustified, especially when they suppose that the fellowship of false teachers and errant brethren is necessitated because such by grace still possess righteousness in Christ. As we examine the subject of grace relative to these problems, we are not alluding to any one person's conclusions, to our knowledge, but considering numerous ideas drifting about in various quarters that do appear to our understanding to be ultimately of one fabric.

The fact of God's favor extended out of love and for his own glory to undeserving sinners is exceedingly precious, and one can only thrill at its exposition in Paul's treatise on justification by faith, the epistle to Rome. The Jew gloried in the law, circumcision, and his Abrahamic parentage. To show that none of these established righteousness, Paul argued that to sinners, which all are, the law is an instrument of condemnation rather than justification. He argued that God's real concern is the cutting away of sin from the heart rather than flesh from the body, and that instead of lineal descendants he wanted spiritual sons of Abraham who imitate his faith.

Instead of futilely glorying in a legalism that could never save because of man's inability to perfectly keep law, Paul declares that we are justified by faith (Romans 5:1). A synonym for faith in this sense is trust. We place our trust in God and rely upon his scheme in Christ. It is a scheme relying not merely on conduct, but having the provision of perfect atonement for imperfect conduct, if we qualify.

An atonement is necessary because we have not merited salvation by perfectly keeping the commandments of God's law. And we have not, nor can we, do enough good acts to eliminate the guilt of our disobedience through which we are consequently lost. (Isaiah 64:6). Thus justification, if any at all, must be by grace (Romans 11:6), a gift undeserved (Romans 6:23).

But God has made the reception of this grace conditional upon our faith. We are saved by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). God of his own love has freely provided the basis upon which he can justly pardon our iniquities, having satisfaction made for them in the suffering of Jesus (II Corinthians 5:21; I Peter 2:24). But we must trust, or have faith in, the divine provisions and conditions in order to appropriate that atonement. One's keeping the conditions by which he is accounted righteous through Christ, rather than by which he actually is righteous, is thus not being saved by his unblemished works, but by faith, or trust in something apart from himself. He is trusting God's arrangement to effect what he has not and cannot. One rejecting or perverting these conditions, which both appropriate and retain God's grace, rejects salvation thereby. And God's grace is something that

must be retained, else there is no such thing as falling therefrom.

The implications of this last point, especially, are given inadequate attention in the theology of brethren who continue to impute righteousness through Christ to many who have come to prefer innovation and perversion to the revealed pattern, or plan, of service. We are made just through what Christ has done, not by what we do, we are reminded. This application is only a restatement of the "man and not the plan" concept. Imputing righteousness to the continuing disobedient ignores the fact that God has required certain things of us if we are to be justified by what Christ has done.

Our salvation being, not of our doing, but trust in God's, has often tempted man to minimize, or even eliminate, human responsibility. Even in the apostolic age it was necessary to guard against perverting grace, using it as an excuse to overlook sin (Romans 6:1-2). It is today being misused to diminish the significance of error in those of the disparate segments of the Restoration Movement. In the past, a similar attitude taken to extreme has occasionally culminated in antinomianism. The true antinomian holds that since we are under grace, submission to a structured system of service and ethics is unnecessary. He is unable to make the distinction between meriting salvation through legal impeccability, and faithfulness to a Savior, which involves devotion to that Savior's desires. And mark this, anyone mitigating the necessity of complying with those desires, and the pattern constituted thereby, is unfaithful to that Savior! But to the antinomian, studied faithfulness is only legalism. Once he is in Christ, he is free from any strict requirement of conduct, and any sinful action and indiscretion is tolerable. He is saved by Christ, not by merit, he says. Some contemporary harangues in the name of grace, ridiculing faithfulness as "commandment keeping," thus sound ominous.

It is in the end a de-emphasis of human responsibility to suppose that in the Restoration Movement the purveyors of doctrinal error such as institutionalism and instrumental music remain justified by grace. Those errors are not merely ideas of personal imprudence, but ideas corruptive of the collective service and worship of God. The feeling of humanity experienced in tolerating the practitioners of such is deluding, and occurs because it is rooted in short-sighted humanism. One is ignoring God's arrangement in deference to men. Actually, the possibly current controversy is not so much, grace versus legalism, as it is, humanism versus the sovereignty of God; the former concerned more with the cordial rapprochement of diverse human elements than with unity in obedience to God.

This fawning humanistic tolerance implies that while God is quite particular as to what conditions appropriate the benefit of grace (faith, repentance, baptism), he is really not too particular about what he has said as to how his children are to serve him, that is, how grace (favor) is retained, and that after all, their right to their inclinations as free men and continuance to embrace one another in fellowship, regardless, is more important than his desires.

Just as tragically, such permissiveness is often called love. And those being tolerated can be especially sweet-spirited. But neither permissiveness nor pragmatic sweet-spiritedness is evidential of the kind of love for the brethren required by God: "*Hereby we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and do his commandments*" (1 John 5:2). If we are the children of God those who do not obey God do not really love us! They use us. One proves his love for the children of God, and for God, in sharing obedience with them. When those with supposedly new enlightenment glory rather in an expanded fellowship, beyond those who prove their love for God by faithfulness to his order, while in tending to tell us something about their gracious love for man, they tell us rather that they have more regard and love for man than for God. Such expanded fellowship is not an application of the doctrine of grace. It is grace perverted. It is humanism. And, oh so very, very contemporary. Humanism pervades our society and our young are inundated by it in secular education. That is one reason why some of them are so susceptible to any premise for overlooking significant differences among brethren.