

# Why Can't They See This?

*Tom J. Nettles*

"Why do my Christian friends have such an aversion to the Doctrines of Grace?" "In addition to that, how can I keep open the channels of communication with them while making progress in helping them understand?" This article focuses on a few principles to bear in mind in the pursuit of these relationships.

## **Difficulties and Priorities**

Many have learned first-hand that the doctrines of grace have a jolting effect when one who has been able to ignore them all his life first feels the impact of the encounter. If it were not true in our own experience, we have observed the perplexity, and sometimes outrage, of someone else's struggle.

Such reactions which highlight the revolutionary tendencies of these doctrines should let us know that these truths are not toys used only to relieve momentary boredom and to be put back into a box when one is tired of playing. Fragile! Handle with care: the opportunity is like cutting and setting a precious stone, not like throwing husks and scraps to pigs. But the delicate nature of the task doesn't diminish the strength necessary for steadiness and perseverance in the job, and it increases the need for sharpness in the tools. This spiritual odyssey calls for rigorous preparation and a readiness for some painful personal growth. Firmness and sharpness of personal conviction, compassion and kindness toward the other person, and patience toward a resistant attitude are necessary.

Furthermore, we should not approach this as if it were the top priority of spiritual life. In the hierarchy of importance nothing can replace the value of truth in one's own life: that God should be glorified through the increase of repentance, growth of faith and increasing conformity to Christ in my life must not be retarded or eclipsed by a misplaced zeal for any other thing. Jesse's instruction as to how we should value our own soul (Mk 8:35) and Paul's zeal for "this one thing" (Phil 8:13,14) set the standard here.

Working for the salvation of others is another priority. There is joy in heaven over one sinner that repents. Paul was willing to become all things in order to win some. Most notably, our Lord's infinite condescension to seek and save the lost gives an urgency to the evangelistic task more compelling than the development of a consistent and systematic approach to Christian truth.

Not to be minimized in importance, however, is this particular adventure which is akin to the joy that the Apostle John expressed in knowing that his children walked in truth (3 John 3,4). Only rarely does something compare with the spiritual delight of seeing a friend, fellow Christian, or fellow minister embrace and enjoy this truth. Though less immediate in its importance, this task is not disjointed from the others, but supports, informs, and purifies them. What could be more revolutionary to a person's sense of worship, gratitude, and adoration of the greatness, kindness, and worthiness of God than an experiential knowledge of the true dimensions of the grace of God?

## **Principles to Encourage Patience**

The reality and power of this, however, often dawns slowly and after a night of tumultuous resistance. The specific truths entailed deal with the most fundamental issues of the relationship between God and man. What is at stake, therefore, on the one hand is our thinking about God: His attributes, decrees and providential interaction with history. On the other hand, they lay bare before our own eyes our sense of pride, self-sufficiency, fair play, and independence. Nothing in our society or natures prepares us for such things as utter dependence, reception of gifts (in this case of infinite worth) for which we have absolutely

no merit, the necessity for continual acknowledgment of debt, and the admission that one's glory can consist only in a self-deprecating gratitude (see Phil. 3:1-11 and Gal. 6:1-3,14-15).

### *Principle of Growth*

Sometimes resistance to this may come because one is still unregenerate. It would, however, be both unbiblical and uncharitable to conclude this about everyone who fails to approve immediately the doctrines of grace (though, to my mind, they are so clear and so God-glorifying that I am both pained and baffled when these truths are either ignored or treated with malice). Many times the absolute dimensions of our depravity, the harmony of justice, holiness and compassion with the unfettered rights of a sovereign God, and the purely gratuitous nature of salvation are so overwhelming that, though experienced immediately in the moment of regeneration and justification, they can only gradually take shape in our mental apprehension of how God has acted savingly toward us.

Firmness of teaching coupled with great longsuffering is a necessary combination in this ministry of doctrinal reformation. Paul recognizes this precise idea in his correspondence with the Ephesians. After having given a clear and moving affirmation of the glory of God in His sovereign bestowal of salvation (1:3-14), he prays that they might know the hope to which God had called them, the riches of God's inheritance in the saints, and omnipotent display of effectual power in bringing about their saving belief (Ephesians 1:17-23). Paul knew they did not grasp all he had told them; but he told them anyway, prayed for them, and continued with instruction as to the centrality of these teachings to an understanding of salvation (Eph 2:1-10).

He also recognizes that the Philippians must grow in their grasp of the completely gratuitous nature of justifying righteousness and the relation of this to one's energetic efforts toward sanctification. In Phil. 3:15 he expresses confidence that God will give them advancement in that understanding; until then they must live in harmony with the truth that they do understand.

In giving instruction to the Corinthians, Paul indicated that such foundational teachings as the unity and exclusiveness of the triune God as creator and sustainer were not fully operative in the actions of some for whom Christ had died (1 Cor 8:4-7,11). Their lack of grasping this made them weak and less able to cope with the moral challenges and ambiguities of a pagan culture. Paul does not call a moratorium on teaching the doctrine of God and its implications for living in God's world. On the contrary, Paul uses them evangelistically in Acts 17 and in refutation of heresy in 1 Timothy 4:1-5. He even urges Timothy to point these truths out and in doing so he will be a good minister of Christ (v.6). Nevertheless, those who were fully aware of these truths were not to use them as a bludgeon on the weaker brother. Paul was willing to sacrifice even his apostolic freedoms in order to treat the Corinthians lovingly while more firmly establishing them in the truth.

Prayer, patience, and self-sacrifice, therefore, are necessarily fundamental in discussion of these truths. I have seen people, even in the intensified study of a seminary atmosphere, endure months and sometimes years of resistance before grasping with joy the truth that from first to last "Salvation is of the Lord."

### *Principle of Common Ground*

An important step in maintaining an open relationship in which these biblical truths can be discussed is to establish common ground. Neither party of the discussion need have the impression that a conflict is being waged between two entirely contrary views of Christianity. One should remind himself as well as his partner in the discussion of the many things on which there is agreement. The greatness of these should not be underestimated. All of them are the results of God's revelation of Himself and are distinctive of evangelical Christianity. Both believe that there is one God; He has revealed Himself in all of creation and in our conscience but particularly and most clearly in His Word, the Bible; this God is a

Trinitarian being existing eternally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All human beings children of Adam and Eve; God has a right to judge, His judgment exhaustively just, and His final judgment establishes eternal abiding places for all moral creatures; our obligations to Him are commensurate with His worthiness; all His creatures, whether they have special revelation and grace or not, continue to be responsible for their worship of this triune God; our failure to meet those worthy obligations places us in a debt proportionate to the worthiness of the person to whom we are obliged; in the fall of Adam and Eve we all fell and constituted as sinful by nature and we immediately become sin by choice; salvation involves the re-establishing of a relationship righteousness and holiness before God; our present condition of condemnation is just and, therefore, God has no other obligation to the re-establishment of the relationship, then is a matter of me and grace, completely unmerited on our part and unobligated God's part; the core of this salvation is the delivering over of the Lord to death in which He voluntarily suffered the just wrath of the Father for our sin; it is only in this death that we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins; the work of the Holy Spirit is necessary to bring us to a saving knowledge of Christ in His saving work; this saving knowledge of Christ consists of repentance of sin and faith in Christ; who come to Him in this way will be received and not turned away; Christ will come again to judge all those living and all those who h died, will establish the new heaven and new earth and so shall ever be with the lord continually worshipping the triune God in al His Glory (Revelation 4:8-11; 5:9-14; 21).

It would be very unlikely for one to have any serious disagreement with an evangelical friend on the truth of these statements. How much common ground is shared and what wonderful common affirmations you can make because of the clarity and beauty and graciousness of God's revelation to us! It would be good to make mud these in order to see that you are not contradictory in your thinking about a large number of foundational truths

## **Principles for Proceeding**

A discussion whose goal is reformation, however, cannot indefinitely remain at the level of the patient tolerance of immaturity the affirmation of common ground. Progress must be made. I would suggest only a couple of principles for emphasis in the discussion.

### *Principle of Progressive Consistency*

One, foundational truths always have other truths that are built on them and are consistent with them. The nature of this consistency sometimes surprises us. Habakkuk 1:12-2:1 pictures a prophet startled and bewildered over what he felt was contradiction to his understanding of God. Habakkuk knew quite well God's attributes of immutable holiness and justice. In fact, his perception of those at-tributes cause him great problems with what he observed in the history of God's people and what God revealed about His purposes. Can God use treacherous people and cruel events in His purposes and not be the author of sin and evil (v.13)? This *apparently* arbitrary sovereignty did not fit the inferences Habakkuk drew from the attributes. The attributes were true, however; and, though complex, God's active providence was not inconsistent with them. Habakkuk learned this, trembled at the power, wisdom, and justice of God, and received a deeper and more steadfast faith (3:16-19).

According to 1 John 2:20-28, every person born of the Spirit of God is very protective of the truth he knows about God. If something appears to him to be a lie, he will not accept it because he "knows the truth" and no lie comes from the truth. Such was the reason for Habakkuk's incredulosity. When the doctrines of grace are dismembered from the larger body of Christian truth and made to appear as Frankensteinian monstrosities, it should not surprise us that they are rejected. They appear to be lies and at odds with indisputable Christian faith. Showing the integral relationship these members have to some of the more prominent parts of the body is the task of the "Reformationist." Those slow to hear may be as surprised as Habakkuk, but hopefully they will also be just as strengthened in faith.

In the final analysis all revelation is preparation for further revelation and consistent with previous revelation. The Bible is filled with this progressive revelation of truth on truth. All of us must realize, however, that the process of revealing truth on truth in an ever more beautiful, if complex, unified body ends a good bit short of exhausting all the knowledge of God (Ephesians 3:8, 19). Finally, we must be content that some truths that are revealed have implications that are yet mysterious and must remain so because God has not counted it wise to let us know.

Nevertheless, many things are cleared up for us by God's gracious revelation. The prophets gave revelation about the things of Christ that they did not quite understand (suffering and glory), but the full filling of the gospel in the incarnation and salvific work of Christ made them clear (1 Peter 1:10-12). The Jews believed the Old Testament and taught it truly, but many were unable to make the advance into seeing Christ as the fulfillment of all previous revelation. They took away the key to knowledge by refusing to advance in their understanding (Luke 11:52). Jesus said that a Scribe of the kingdom can receive the new revelation as giving the old its proper meaning (Matthew 13:52). Examples of the fulfillment of previous revelation by new, and explanation of old by new would be endless. Jesus does it with the new birth in John 3 (He indicates that Nicodemus as a teacher of the Law should have understood these things); Paul knew that that was his specific calling as he tells the Ephesians, "In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets" (Ephesians 3:4, 5). He fulfills his apostolic calling in describing the relationships between faith, works, law and righteousness in Romans and Galatians and God's calling of the Gentiles by grace in Ephesians and other places and in giving a host of other truths. Their explanations point out what was implied in the old all the time but only made clear and specific in the person and work of Christ. This is Peter's point in 2 Peter 1:19 when he says "And we have the word of the prophets made more certain and you will do well to pay attention to it as a light shining in a dark place".

This principle is true in the doctrines of grace. They do not contradict the truths I mentioned above, but give to them their purest and most consistent expression. What could be more consistent with salvation by pure unmerited favor than *unconditional* election? That means His choosing of us is not premised upon anything meritorious in us. What could be more consistent with the reality of human depravity than the doctrine of effectual calling? Surely if we are dead in trespasses and sins and not seeking God, then He must raise us from death to life before we will hate, and thus repent of, our sin and before we will love, and thus place faith in, Christ. What could be more consistent with the love of God for His Son and the impeccable justice of God than the doctrine of definite atonement? If Christ's death involved a true suffering of the just wrath of God for sins, will any portion of his suffering for sinners go unrewarded or unsatisfied (cf. Isaiah 53:4-6, 10-12; and Romans 8:31-39)? We could go on, but the point is easily established. While we speak this way, however, we are aware that these doctrines are not simply logical inferences drawn from prior truths (though they certainly are consistent with them as mentioned above) but are themselves the result of biblical exegesis and involve receiving the full revelation of God in Scripture.

### *Principle of Grace*

A second principle is this: no element of the Doctrines of Grace is a hindrance to the salvation of any individual. Grace makes the way; it does not block the way. Would grace be more gracious if it stopped short of the actual bestowal of infinite blessings: All of us are in a hopeless condition (Titus 3:3) and under condemnation (John 3:18-21). Neither grace nor any particular element of its manifestation is in any sense the ground of any person's condemnation (John 3:16, 17). Unconditional election, effectual calling, definite (or if someone prefers, limited) atonement, and preserving grace are all gracious, purely unmerited, and explanatory of how God does finally save undeserving, resistant, justly condemned sinners. Christ's atonement will not hinder or place a barrier in the way of anyone who comes to Him: "He that cometh to me, I will in no wise cast out." God's calling of all sinners to repentance is not insincere but

in dead earnest; His requirement of repentance and right to command it does not diminish one whit simply because we are so hardened that only omnipotent power will turn us (Eph. 1:19, 20). To complain about this is to turn God's grace into a debt He owes us. Because of this, no one can suppose that the Doctrines of Grace prohibit him from coming to Christ if he desires to do so or excuse him from seeking to know God through the person and work of the lord Jesus Christ.

The manner of the operations of grace is revealed in order that we might know to whom we are to be grateful for salvation and that we might learn to lament ever more deeply such sinfulness that would still condemn us were it not for grace. The objects of the operations of grace remain hidden, except evidentially from genuine demonstrations of repentance, faith, and perseverance so that all may realize that Christ's urging to "strive to enter in at the strait gate" applies equally to all (Luke 13:22-24).

## **Conclusion**

The one who would teach for reformation must be patient, loving, and gentle. He must not only be mentally apt but also spiritually prepared in his heart both for the kinds of objections that come and the length of the journey. In addition to avoiding a compromise of the truth, he must work at holding it in the beauty of holiness. Also, he should continually relate distinguishing grace to the large foundation of evangelical agreement. Give no reason for any to doubt that you only want to honor the lord Jesus in His matchless and gracious condescension for sinners.

