

GRACE ALONE

An Evangelical Problem?

by Kim Riddlebarger

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Outline:

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1) What do we mean when we say "that we are saved by grace alone?"

When we use the term "grace alone," what we mean is that our salvation from the wrath of God - our deliverance from hell - is because of something good in God, and not because of anything good in us. The Biblical conception of human nature after Adam and Eve's fall into sin is not a pretty picture, and Americans, who seem to have an unlimited confidence in human nature and human goodness, have a very difficult time accepting what the bible says about the human condition. In a democratic culture such as ours, we believe that our vote counts, and that by exercising our right to choose, we can actually and significantly change the world around us. We are all taught from our youth that we have it within ourselves to accomplish anything, if we simply put our minds to it and give it our best efforts. And when we become Christians we carry that optimism over into our theology. If God tells us to do something, it must be because we have the ability to do what he commands! Choice becomes everything. And thus we fall headlong into one of the greatest heresies in church history, the heresy of Pelagianism, a theme to which we will return at the end of this lecture. It is really quite simple; grace alone doesn't make much sense to an American who doesn't think that much is wrong with the human condition in the first place. For if people are basically good, why then, do we need grace in order to be saved.

But to those who understand what the bible teaches about the effects of sin, grace alone is our only hope of heaven. And thus when we speak of grace alone (sola gratia), we are speaking of the fact that God saves us, because of his mercy and graciousness toward us, and not because of something - indeed anything - in us that makes us desirable to God. We really cannot understand grace alone unless we understand what it is, exactly, that sin has wrought upon us.

2) What do the Scriptures teach about the Human Condition?

The Scriptures are very clear about the effects of Adam's sin upon the human race, and there are a host of passages that speak to the issue of human sinfulness. In Job 14:1-4 we read, "Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble. He springs up like a flower and withers away; like a fleeting shadow, he does not endure. Do you fix your eye on such a one? Will you bring him before you for judgment? Who can bring what is pure from the impure? No one!" In other words, we are born "impure" or sinful, and therefore, subject to the judgment of God. Job asks the poignant question in this regard, "who can bring what is pure from what is impure?" and the answer is emphatically, "no one." Jeremiah (13:23) asks a similar question, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil." Thus because of our sin, we are impure, accustomed to doing evil, and unable to do anything to change our true nature any more than a leopard can wish his spots away, or that we can change the color of our skin simply by wishing it were so.

The Scriptures are also clear that our sinful nature is something with which we are born. According to the Psalmist in Psalm 51:5, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." Thus we are born sinful, sinful from the very moment of conception. The Psalmist goes on to say in Psalm 58(3), "Even from birth the wicked go astray; from the womb they are wayward and speak lies." We go astray from birth and we are born liars. We do not need to learn how to sin, it comes quite naturally to us.

The sinful nature (i.e., "the flesh") with which we are born produces a host of sinful actions. The author of 1 Kings (8:46) contends "there is no one who does not sin" and the author of Proverbs (20:9) laments, "Who can say, 'I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin'? Indeed Moses writes in Genesis 6:5, "the LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time." Thus because we are born in sin, every thought, every inclination is purely evil. This is not something that we enjoy hearing, but it is what the Scripture clearly teaches about human nature.

And this doctrine of human sinfulness is not only clearly taught in the OT, it is found with equal force in the New Testament, even on the lips of our Lord. For our Lord says much the same thing in Matthew 15:19, when he declares "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander." Thus the specific sins which we commit come from the sinful condition of our hearts. For as it is used in Scripture, the heart is the seat of our very personality - the heart is the true self, what we really are. Jesus went on to point out in Matthew 7:16-20, that "By their fruit you will recognize [wolves who come in sheep's clothes]. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them." Can any one of us here pretend for even a single moment that unlike everyone else, we are born good trees, and that we somehow escape the effects of sin which befall the entire human race? For out of each of our hearts inevitably spring the evil deeds and sins that all of us commit on a regular basis.

And if that is not all, it is Jesus who also reminds us that even if we haven't committed a specific sin with our hands, you can bet we have done it in our hearts. It is Jesus who declares, "anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Jesus also said, "You have heard it said, 'Do not murder,' and anyone who murders will be subject to judgement." And so there may be someone who is even now saying to themselves, "I am not a murderer!" I have never taken a life. Jesus says otherwise. You may not have taken the life of another, but as Jesus says, "any one who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgement," and "anyone who calls his brother a fool will be in danger of the fire of hell." Thus any one of us who has ever driven a Southern California freeway is certainly guilty as charged.

While the Scriptures are clear that we are born in sin, and that we sin because we are sinners, the Scriptures are equally clear about the specific effects of our own sinfulness upon our relationship with God. According to the Apostle Paul, (Romans 8:7-8), "the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God." Thus because of the sin into which we are born, we cannot submit to God's law, nor do anything to please him. So much for non-Christians supposedly keeping the 10 Commandments. In his letter to the Galatians (5:19-21), Paul speaks of the human condition this way:

"The acts of the sinful nature [the flesh] are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God." While we are apt to make distinctions between so-called big and little sins, Paul would not agree. All sins damn, even such things as jealousy and ambition, and these sins that damn spring forth spontaneously from our sinful nature. This certainly calls to mind our Lord's comments about bad fruit coming forth from a bad tree. The sins of the flesh spring forth from our sinful hearts as surely as apples grow on an apple tree.

And when all is said and done, Paul indeed paints a very dark picture. In Romans 3:10-12 he writes; "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." Paul is clear, here, though many of us do not like what he says.

First, he points out that there are none righteous, that is, none without the guilt of sin. And for the sake of emphasis, he repeats the phrase, "no, not even one."

Next he states that because of sin, there is no one who understands, for as he says elsewhere, sin has darkened our understanding, made our thinking futile, and hardened our hearts to the things of God (Ephesians 4:18 ff).

Third, the result of these blinding effects of sin is that there is no one who seeks God. Even though these words make many of us choke, they are simply un-American, nevertheless, Paul is utterly clear, because of sin, "no one seeks God." Tough words, but we cannot evade them simply because we do not like them.

And if we do not believe the testimony of Paul, Jesus says exactly the same thing. Speaking to the crowds that followed him after he feed the five thousand and because they saw the miracles and wanted their stomachs filled (John 6:44), Jesus declared, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day." In other words, you cannot come to God unless you are drawn, the term translated here as "to draw" is also translated "to drag" elsewhere in the NT, as for example, when Paul is dragged out of the temple against his will in Acts 21:30. And then again in that same discourse in John 6, as if he was not clear enough the first time he said it, Jesus went on to say in verse 65, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him." Thus unless we are enabled to come to Father, we cannot and indeed will not turn to God and embrace Jesus Christ. For we are sinful, we do not seek God, we do not understand God, we do not obey God's law, and indeed says Paul, we cannot. Our hearts are sinful, there are none righteous, not even one, and we sin freely and willingly because we want to.

Thus when all is said and done, what this means is that if God does not do something to rescue us from our predicament, we will perish in our sins. And this is what we mean when we say we are saved by grace alone, because there is certainly nothing in us worth saving and there is nothing that creatures in such a predicament can do to save themselves. Our salvation depends upon God's graciousness and not upon our goodness.

So it is against this backdrop the biblical description of sin and its effects that we now turn our focus to grace alone.

3) What the Scriptures say about Sola Gratia:

Simply stated, if the Scriptures are clear that men and women are sinful by nature and cannot do anything to save themselves or even prepare themselves to be saved, the Scriptures are equally clear that it is God who saves by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone. This means that it is God who acts first, upon the sinner, while the sinner is dead in sin. For as we have seen, the sinner is enslaved to the sinful nature and its passions, and will not come to God, as Paul declares. But the good news is that while sinners do not seek God, God seeks sinners. And this is what we mean by the phrase, grace alone.

The Bible approaches the idea of grace alone from a number of ways and there are three passages that we need to consider in some detail, John 3, John 11, and Ephesians 2.

Many Evangelicals identify themselves as "born again" Christians. And indeed, as our Lord expressly states in John 3:3-7, "unless one is born again," they cannot see, much less enter into the kingdom of God." What then, does it mean to be "born again?" Historic Protestants, both the Lutherans and Reformed, have not placed the notion of being "born again" at the center of the Christian faith in the way in which many of our Evangelical contemporaries do. The reason for this is not because Lutheran and Reformed Christians reject the idea of being "born again." Instead, they equate John's teaching on being born again with the larger Biblical category of "regeneration." That is, being "born again," is a synonym for being "regenerate," or "being made alive," and therefore, while an essential aspect of the Christian life, it is approached from the perspective that regeneration is something God does, not man.

Another reason historic Protestants have not stressed being "born again," is because regeneration is an act of God upon the sinner, whereas the New Testament, on the other hand, stresses that the Gospel is something that God has done for us in Christ outside of ourselves, and that the Gospel alone - the message that Christ died and rose again for sinners (1 Corinthians 15:1-8) - is the power of God unto salvation. It is through preaching the Gospel, the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ for sinners, that God gives the new birth, or causes one to be "born again," to use John's phrase. The new birth, it is important to note, does not come through preaching the new birth, it comes through the preaching of Christ crucified!

If being "born again" or "regenerated" is an essential aspect of the Christian faith, what exactly do we mean by the term? The noted Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof, defines regeneration as "a work in which man is purely passive, and in which there is no place for human co-operation....The creative work of God produces new life, in virtue of which man, made alive with Christ, shares the resurrection life, and can be called a new creature." Indeed, no one will ever see heaven if they are not regenerate or "born again."

It is also vital to notice that Jesus' words here are not to be taken as a command in which we are to do what it takes to "be born again." In John 3, Jesus is not telling us to do anything! Instead, he is telling us about our condition - telling us that something must happen to us first, if we are to see and then enter the kingdom of God. Thus, "Unless you are born again, you cannot enter into the Kingdom of God." Later in the same gospel, our Lord tells us that "we must cross over from death to life" (John 5:24), and that no one can even come to Him unless the Father not only draw them (6:44), but also enables them to come to Him (6:65). In fact, in John 3:3-8, notice that Jesus makes it very clear that "flesh gives birth to flesh, but Spirit gives birth to spirit." The Spirit is like the wind, it blows wherever it wills. When we look back at John chapter one, we find the very similar statement that "we are born not of natural descent, nor of a human decision or a husband's will, but [we are] born of God (John 1:13)." We often quote the first part of the verse, "to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God," and we then interpret this to mean, that unless we first choose God we cannot be saved. But the very next clause tells us just the opposite, namely, "we are born not of natural descent, nor of a human decision or a husband's will, but [we are] born of God."

Therefore, it is vital to notice that throughout the Scriptural data, especially here in John 3, God the Holy Spirit is the agent of regeneration, the one who gives the new birth, and not a human "decision" to accept Jesus as savior, or to invite him into our hearts. As most commentators point out, the word translated here as "born again," (anōthen) is a word that can either mean "from above" or "second time." Nicodemus very likely understood it to have the latter meaning since he very pointedly asks Jesus, "how can I go back into the womb to be born all over again."

Second, it is also important to notice that Jesus connects being "born again" to being born of "water and the Spirit." What on earth does Jesus mean by this? The Christian family has generally answered this question in one of three ways. Some such as Luther and most of the church fathers, have understood this to refer to Christian baptism; the water spoken of here is the water of baptism. A second group of commentators have

argued that water is a reference to the baptism of John the Baptist. This connection perhaps can be found in chapter 2, verse 6 and can be strengthened by looking further in chapter three, where water is connected with purification (v. 25). A third view equates water with natural birth or procreation. There is some evidence that Rabbinic writers did indeed connect water with natural birth and male semen. If water is seen in this manner, the idea is conveyed that just as Nicodemus was born the first time (of natural descent - water), he must also be born again a second time by the Holy Spirit. This is the way most modern Evangelical and Reformed commentators interpret the passage. This would also pick up on the notion that two births are in view. In the first birth "flesh gives birth to flesh," and in the second birth (the birth about which Jesus is informing Nicodemus), the Spirit gives birth to spirit, and we are "born again."

But no matter how we decide upon this matter, there is one thing that is certainly precluded by John 3, and that is the idea that being "born again," is something that results from an act on our part. If Jesus is clear about anything, it is that God is the active party while we remain passive, and are acted upon by God. In the new birth, God is the active party as men and women, who are dead in sins and transgressions, cannot be seen to resurrect themselves. Both the Lutheran and Reformed traditions carefully following the Scriptures, connect regeneration to the proclamation of the Word of God, specifically the Law and the Gospel, and not to the powers of the fallen human will. Therefore, if we wish to see God call the dead to life and give the gift of new birth, we preach Christ crucified, for it is through this message that God gives the gift of the new birth and calls people to faith in his Son.

Thus any view of being "born again," which defines regeneration either as a work of man, or resulting from a work of man, is therefore, seriously deficient, and denies that we are saved by grace alone.

Another one of the passages we need to briefly consider is found in John 11, when our Lord raises his friend Lazarus from the dead. In this account John details for us the utterly amazing story of how our Lord brought back to life a man who had been dead for some four days. The raising of Lazarus is important for several reasons, one of which being it clearly demonstrates the idea of sola gratia. The miracle of raising the dead demonstrates perhaps more clearly than anything else, Jesus' power over death and the grave. For only God in human flesh can call forth life where there is death. As Jesus himself declares to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die (v. 25)." This power to give life takes two forms. In John 5:24-25, Jesus says "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live." This means that in a sense, there are two resurrections for the one who trusts in Christ for salvation. The first resurrection - a "spiritual" resurrection - occurs so that one can believe in Christ, for our Lord himself states that whoever believes in him has already crossed over from death to life. That is, as we have seen in our treatment of John 3, through the sovereign power of God, we are "born again" or regenerated by the Holy Spirit, through the Word of God. When we are given the new birth, in effect, at that very moment, we cross over from death to life. The second resurrection, of course, occurs at the end of the age when Jesus Christ returns in judgement and to raise the dead at the end of the age. This is the bodily resurrection.

But the most important thing to note about the account of the raising of Lazarus, is that Lazarus was dead! He was not merely sick, or a tad under the weather, nor was he doing anything to co-operate with the grace of God, when Jesus called him forth from the grave. In fact, his only contribution to his salvation was the fact that he was dead! Lazarus was not inside the tomb taking the bandages off, unwrapping himself, so that Jesus would do his part if Lazarus did his! Our Lord did not go to the tomb and leave a medicine outside that would help Lazarus to raise himself, if only he Lazarus would reach out and take the medicine. Jesus did not stand outside and "woo" Lazarus to come forth! Lazarus could do nothing to raise himself, apart from the sovereign voice of God calling him forth from the tomb and giving life to him in the process. And this exactly what the Scripture says of us, we are dead in sins and transgressions, and just like Lazarus, we too must be called to life by God

through the word of Jesus or else we remain dead in our sins. And this is the meaning of grace alone God calling us to life when we are reeking in death, and calling us not because of anything he sees in us.

Another very important text in this regard is found in the first 10 verses of the second chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Listen very carefully to what Paul says: "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient." Like Jesus, Paul is crystal clear that we are "dead in transgressions and sins." There is no way for optimistic Americans to circumvent the thrust of Paul's argument here. And so in verse 3, Paul can describe how it is, that being dead in sin, leads to a life characterized by sinful actions. "All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature [our flesh] and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath." Thus because we are born sinful, dead in trespasses and in sins, we live our lives trying to gratify the cravings of our flesh to which we are enslaved. As Paul says, we are by nature children of wrath, and therefore, rightfully subject to God's righteous judgement. This is very clear: we are dead in sins and transgressions, enslaved to our sinful passions and desires, and by nature children of wrath. If left to ourselves, we are headed for hell and eternal judgement, and we can do nothing to change things.

It is here, then, with this picture of human sinfulness in his mind that Paul abruptly changes subjects, and gives us one of the clearest presentations of sola gratia, found anywhere in Scripture. Thus we read in verse 4, "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions it is by grace you have been saved." It is vital to note that Paul says that it is when we are dead in sins and transgressions that God made us alive with Christ. As Jesus called Lazarus forth from the tomb, a man who had been dead for four days and who was totally incapable of doing anything to co-operate and save himself, so too, God makes us alive with Christ when we were dead in sin. And this is what we mean when we speak of "grace alone." It is because of God's mercy and His love for helpless sinners, that folk who are sinful by nature and by choice, are now believers in Jesus Christ! It is God's choice of us in Jesus Christ that saves, not our choice of Christ! For the Scriptures declare that it is God who acts upon us in his love and mercy when we are dead in sin. How on earth, do dead men and women make themselves alive? Can they co-operate with God's grace? How do dead men and women do their part so that God can supposedly do his? This is sheer nonsense. It is because God calls us forth from death through his word, and only because God calls us forth that we embrace Jesus Christ through faith in the first place. This is why we speak of grace alone.

Paul goes on to make this point with even greater clarity in the balance of the chapter. "And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus." Because God has made us alive, we are now seen as raised and seated with Christ in heaven, because as Paul will say in Romans 11:29, "God's gifts and calling are irrevocable." God doesn't start something and lose interest and quit. He is faithful even when we are not.

Thus Paul can conclude in verses 8 and ff., "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." Though this is one of the most oft-quoted passages in the New Testament, I'm not sure if we ever stop to fully consider what it is, exactly, that Paul is saying here. The context of Ephesians 2:8 is the condition of being dead in sins and transgressions, and our enslavement to the sinful nature in verses 1-5. And so it is clear, I think, that when pointing out that "God makes us alive with Christ, even when we were dead in sin," Paul's explanation is sola gratia that is, "it is by grace you have been saved." That God raised us in Christ when we were dead in sin, is to be saved by grace. We must be clear about this, or we will miss what Paul is saying. I have heard far too many people say to me over the years, "Oh yes, I believe we are saved by grace alone," and approvingly quote this verse, and then they turn right around and argue that unless we do something first, unless we decide, unless we choose, unless we accept Jesus Christ as our personal Savior, grace is useless. It is crystal clear that this is not

what Paul is saying, and to argue that grace is of no avail to us, unless we do something first, is to deny sola gratia altogether!

If you are not convinced, consider the rest of the passage. "For it is by grace you have been saved though faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works so that no one can boast." Whether or not the faith mentioned here by Paul is the gift spoken of or not, it doesn't matter. First, we are not saved by faith, we are saved by grace through faith. We are not saved because we believe, but it is through faith in Christ (sola fide) that God saves --- from our being made alive in Christ, to our exercising faith, to being saved from God's wrath, and our being raised in Christ and even now, our being seated in the heavenlies with him --- it is all God's doing, not ours. The fact is, Paul says that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone and the whole thing, from beginning to end, is a gift. We'll talk about how faith relates to this in our second hour, but if you think that grace depends upon faith, and not the other way around, you misread and misunderstand Paul at this point. This becomes clear in Romans 10, as Paul says there that "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ." That is, faith arises in connection with the preaching of the gospel. As Jesus spoke forth the word of God and raised Lazarus from the dead, the same thing happens to us through the preaching and sharing of the gospel today. For it is through the word of the Gospel, and only through the Word of the Gospel, that God calls us forth from the dead -- or to use Paul's language here, "God made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in sin, for you have been saved by grace." And this beloved, is precisely what we mean when we speak of grace alone. God makes us alive, when we are dead in sin. This is what it means to be saved by grace alone.

4) Why is it, then, that American evangelicals have so many problems with this biblical teaching?

There is no teaching in Christian theology that offends our contemporaries (especially our Christian friends and family), any more than the teaching of sola gratia. Americans hate to be told "no," that they are helpless. Surprisingly, the greatest opposition to the biblical teaching on this point comes not from a secular culture, but from household-name leaders in the American Church. From contemporary figures such as Chuck Smith at Calvary Chapel to Bill Bright and Campus Crusade, to virtually all forms of revivalism and Pentecostalism which spring from the loins of one Charles Grandison Finney (to whom we will return in a minute), to Alexander Campbell and the Restorationist movement, to Joseph Smith and what later on became the cult known as Mormonism, to William Miller and the Adventist movement, and we can go on and on; all of these movements are based, at least in part, upon a denial of sola gratia, in direct opposition to Reformation theology, and the biblical teaching on this point. Americans hate to be told that God does not depend upon them and a decision that they make. And it is here, then, that we as Reformation Christians and historic Protestants run smack dab into our culture and to much of American Christianity. This is why our friends and families look at us like we have three heads when we speak of these doctrines. But this is the historic Protestant position, and the wholesale rejection of sola gratia demonstrates how far the "evangelical movement" has departed from the historic and biblical Evangelical faith.

This rejection of sola gratia is not new, in fact, it is an ancient heresy known as Pelagianism. Named for the monk Pelagius (who lived in the fourth century) and who was the arch-foe of St. Augustine, Pelagianism is that teaching which emphasizes the human freedom, sees original sin not as corruption and guilt inherited from our first father but simply the bad example introduced by into the world by Adam. Pelagianism sees grace as simply an influence enticing us to act upon proper information. And it is only natural that rugged, self-made, independent, frontier Americans would naturally gravitate to a theology that emphasized human ability and natural freedom to act. It is from Pelagius and not Holy Scripture that we derive the idea that children are born innocent, not sinful, and it is from Pelagius that we learn that sin is simply that which we do, not what we are. In the words of one historian, "America is very much in favor of this Pelagian idea that every individual can always make a new beginning, that he is able by his individual freedom to make decisions for or against the divine."

As American Christians moved to the frontier away from the established communities along the eastern seaboard, they also moved away from their Puritan and Calvinistic assessment of human nature. If we could conquer the west, build cities where there had been only wilderness, and if this was the fruit of our manifest destiny and our democratic ideal, then the "terrible honesty" of Calvinistic convictions, to use Ann Douglas' phrase, made little sense. In this context, Americans are rugged, capable and basically good people. And so, Pelagius became our patron saint and Charles Finney his main spokesman.

It is no accident that most of the Pelagianizing movements just mentioned, sprang up on the American frontier in a region in upper state New York, known to historians as the "burned over district," a region which produced millennialism and Millerites, Joseph Smith and Mormonism, Alexander Campbell and the Restoration movement, the Shakers and a host of others, all which grew up in the Wake of Charles Finney and his new measures. From a Reformed perspective, the "burned over district" is a kind of a theological Bermuda Triangle.

By the time of the Second Great Awakening in the latter years of the 17th century, the Reformation preaching of Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield which characterized the first great awakening of the 1730's-40's, had given way to a man-centered, experience oriented theology. And it was Charles Finney, perhaps more than anyone else, who ensured that the Second Great Awakening undid the Reformation emphases of the first. Finney was born in 1792, and was a child of both the American democratic ideal as well as the frontier spirit. After studying law, Finney experienced a dramatic conversion in 1821, and then sought to enter the Presbyterian ministry. It was soon all too evident that Finney was not interested in the Westminster Standards, the basic statement of Presbyterian doctrine, and that his preaching was more or less combination of the New Haven theology - a radical modification of the theology of Jonathan Edwards, and common-sense case law typical of William Blackstone. It was Finney who invented the anxious bench (the fore-runner of the alter call), and established the protracted revival meeting. Interestingly enough, both Jesse Jackson and Jerry Falwell stand in Finney's shadow, as both the liberal-left and the Christian-right trace their own activist roots directly to Finney's stress upon political activism and social reform. It is from Finney that we trace prohibitionism and the temperance movement as well as abolitionism. The danger in this stress upon Christian activism is, of course, that Christianity in Finney's scheme, becomes activism. Reformation Christians would, on the other hand, insist that while Christians should be abolitionists and pro-life, abolitionism and being pro-life per se is not Christianity. Prohibitionism is, of course, right out! It is a pernicious error bequeathed to us by the Methodists!

One thing I admire about Finney is that he is clear. In his Lectures on Revival (1835) Finney "out Pelagius' Pelagius" to use Dr. Robert Godfrey's phrase, when he states "A revival is not a miracle according to another definition of the term "miracle" something above the powers of nature. There is nothing in religion beyond the ordinary powers of nature....A revival is not a miracle, nor dependent on a miracle in any sense. [A revival] is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means." Thus if we jiggle the lever in the right way, and simply use the right means, we don't need the grace of God, at all. We have all the natural ability we need. Thus a revival does not at all depend upon God, it depends upon us, plain and simple. As the Princeton theologian B. B. Warfield remarked, this is not theology at all. This is ethics. According to Warfield, "we said that God might be eliminated entirely from Finney's ethical theory without injury to it: are we not prepared to now say that [God] might be eliminated from it with some advantage to it."

In a later work Finney expresses his rejection of sola gratia very clearly. In his Systematic Theology (1846) he wrote, "Regeneration consists in the sinner changing his ultimate choice, intention, preference; or in changing from selfishness to love and benevolence; or, in other words, in turning from the supreme choice of self-gratification, to the supreme love of God and the equal love of his neighbor. Of course the subject of regeneration must be an agent in the work (p. 224)." As I said, Finney is clear and it is hard to misunderstand him here. Man is the agent of his own regeneration. A more blatant rejection of what the Scriptures teach about the new-birth and regeneration is hardly imaginable. Finney's Lazarus is capable of resurrecting himself, without God's help, thank you.

Why Charles Finney is important to us this morning, is precisely because it is Finney who serves to sow the Pelagian seed which germinates all over the American landscape in subsequent years. Think of his influence on the contemporary church for just one moment:

Finney is the father of revivalism, characterized by the frontier revival tent meeting and the sawdust trail. Finney's revivalist legacy is most clearly seen today in a stadium filled with Promise Keepers.

Finney is the father of the alter call and the "evangelistic meeting" that takes place apart from the normal preaching and sacramental ministry of the local church. It was the stress upon the "new measures," as Finney called them that largely served to displace the sacramental and preaching ministry of the church for technique-oriented evangelism.

The entire church growth movement, which seeks to entice so-called "seekers" to church by removing those things from the church service which offend them (in other words, anything distinctly Christian), can be traced back to Finney's new measures; only the new measures now come to us couched in the language of marketing and sales, target groups and demographics.

Whether it be Chuck Smith, Bill Bright, or Billy Graham, there is no doubt that one branch of each of their respective intellectual family trees traces itself back to Charles Finney, and even if another branch in that same family tree can be traced back to Protestant forbears, these traits are now most certainly recessive. For Finney's family characteristics are now dominant in the American church. And sola gratia is no longer a doctrine to be defended, it is an offence and an embarrassment. Who needs God when man is quite capable on his own.

5) How are we to respond?

First, the Bible does not approach this subject from the perspective that everyone is entitled to a chance at heaven, as do most Americans. Now it makes for a wonderful system of government when we see things democratically everyone has a vote and everyone is equal before the Law, and that in order to be fair, everyone should have an equal chance to participate in the process. We can all exercise our vote, make a decision, and really change things. God, however, is not democratic and he does not operate according to American democratic ideals. The Scriptures do not begin with human freedom, as it is argued, they begin with the fall of Adam into sin and its consequences. This means that we lost our vote and our freedom in the Fall! And because the entire human race fell with Adam, we are everything that the Scriptures say about us. Thus, as Christians, we must begin where the Bible does, with the fact of human sinfulness and with the idea clearly in our minds that no one deserves to go to heaven, and that none of us can do anything to get there. To start with the presupposition that unless we have free will to choose God whenever we want to, or else Christianity (and by implication - God) would not be fair, we miss the point. God does not owe sinners anything. And if we are thinking this way, we have, perhaps, imbibed too deeply from our democratic culture, and we are not approaching things, as we should, from the perspective found in the Holy Scriptures.

Second, the degree to which we argue that we contribute something to our salvation is the degree to which we deny sola gratia. It was Charles Spurgeon who said, "he that thinks lightly of sin, thinks lightly of the savior." It is really very simple. Either God saves sinners who are dead in sin, by calling them forth from the grave when they could contribute nothing, or else sinners have something good within them is that not somehow tainted, corrupted, polluted or damaged by the fall. As we have seen the Scriptures teach the former rather than the latter. To add anything we do to grace alone, is to deny grace alone! You cannot have it either way. As Calvin puts in the Institutes, "Whatever mixture men study to add from the power of free-will to the grace of God, is only a corruption of it; just as if anyone should dilute good wine with dirty or bitter water." Since we are sinful from head to toe, from hair to toe-nail, whatever our contribution we might add to God's grace, only can serve to pollute, not to activate the grace of God! And so when we look to as answers for questions like, "Why does God save this one rather than that one?" we do well to answer as one Puritan divine put it, "There is no reason to be given for grace, but grace." God is God and we are sinful creatures. It is not ours to ask why.

Third, sola gratia is the basis for our comfort and assurance as sinners before a Holy God. Since any contribution that I am supposed to make to make my salvation possible is necessarily tainted by sin, I will always be plagued by doubts about what it is that I am supposed to contribute, and whether or not I contributed it in the right way. If I think that I am saved by my decision to accept Jesus as my Savior, how do I know if I really meant it when I asked him into my heart? If I am saved because of my faith, what do I do when my faith is weak, or when I am in sin or else plagued by nagging doubts? Do I need to be saved all over again? This is not religion of faith but a religion of fear and of pride. Since the Scriptures teach that we are saved not because of anything that is in us, and that the merit necessary for our salvation comes to us from the person and work of Jesus Christ, we look, not within at what we have done, but we to our savior to see what he has done. For in Jesus Christ we see what it means to be saved by grace.

We look to a savior who calls the dead from the tomb when they still reek of their sins; a savior who promises never to leave or forsake us, even when we go astray. We look to a good shepherd who will lose none of his sheep and who declares; "all that the Father gives to me will come to me, and I will lose none of them, but raise them all up on the last day." We look to a savior who died for all of our sins and who kept God's Law perfectly every minute of his life, so that his perfect righteousness could be given to cover our unrighteousness. We look to a savior who was crucified, but who conquered death and the grave and who rose again who ascended into heaven, and who even now is ruling and reigning, all the while praying for us, as our advocate and defender. Sola gratia is most clearly seen in the fact that Jesus Christ came to do for us they very thing that we could no do for ourselves. For he came to seek and to save that which was lost. This beloved is sola gratia, the sinless Son of God, dying upon a Roman cross for the sins of the world, rising from the dead for our justification, and making us alive, through his word, when we were still dead in our sins. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

Dr. Kim Riddlebarger is a graduate of California State University in Fullerton (B.A., Westminster Theological Seminary in California (M.A.R.), and Fuller Theological Seminary (Ph. D.). Kim has contributed chapters to books such as *Power Religion: The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church*, *Roman Catholicism: Evangelical Protestants Analyze What Unites & Divides Us*, and *Christ The Lord: The Reformation & Lordship Salvation*, and is currently the pastor of Christ Reformed Church in Placentia, California.

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