



# THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE

## Introduction

There is a human tendency to try to 'improve' on God's theology, to add extrabiblical commands where God has not said anything. Once these rules are established you can then go to God and say see, I have kept all your law- and then some. The first recorded person to create extra rules was Eve in the garden of Eden. What did God say to them?

*Genesis 2:16-17, "16 And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; 17 but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die." "*

Listen to what Eve says in

*Genesis 3:2-3, "2 The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, 3 but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"*

God never said they couldn't touch it. They could have played football with the fruit, fed it to the animals, played cricket with it. No sin. By the time of Jesus, a whole body of extrabiblical rules and regulations had developed which the average layman would struggle to get practical guidance from. The rules also had the unfortunate effect that in many instances they nullified God's explicit command. Jesus condemned this practice for instance in

*Mark 7:9-13, 9 And he continued, "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe<sup>[c]</sup> your own traditions! 10 For Moses said, 'Honor your father and mother,'<sup>[d]</sup> and, 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.'<sup>[e]</sup> 11 But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God)— 12 then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother. 13 Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that."*

The Doctrines of Grace is a summary of the Reformed teachings that emphasizes the utter inability of man to save himself, the necessity of the divine initiative to save us from our sin and God's absolute

sovereignty in the process. From start to finish, God makes our salvation happen – alone. It is not a cooperative process. These doctrines are not a summary of Reformed theology itself. I will be speaking this morning on the Doctrines of Grace, in particular the aspect of it called Total Depravity. I hope to cover all the other doctrines at a later date whenever I am given the opportunity to speak. To get a better understanding I will first give you a brief church history on the subject.

## How Did we Get Here?

Around the year 480, a theologian we now refer to as Saint Augustine of Hippo prayed this prayer, “Grant what thou dost command, and command what thou dost wilt”. A modern English translation reads like this, “Grant what you command, and command what you will”. A British monk by the name of Pelagius was offended by this prayer and petitioned to have Augustine censured. Pelagius read those words and correctly understood that Augustine was implying that man is incapable of obeying God’s commands unless God beforehand gives him the ability to do so. Pelagius emphasized human ability. He said if God commands us to do something then it implies we are able to do it otherwise it would be unjust of God to do so. Pelagius also argued that when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden it affected only Adam and Eve, therefore every man can obey God completely if they wanted. Augustine on the other hand said that since Adam and Eve ate the fruit, all their descendants (all of us) have become comprehensively corrupted. Only by God’s enabling power can we respond to his overtures. Only by God’s prior work in our hearts can we truly obey him. Pelagius was condemned at the Council of Carthage in AD418. In today’s language we would say Pelagius was destroyed by Augustine. Despite this his ideas never really died. Like a Phoenix this dangerous idea was kept on life support only to rise from the ashes again in the Middle Ages. He took another 1000 years before **Martin Luther** came out in the 16th century and restored the doctrine of man’s inability to seek God on his own. Martin Luther was the German monk of the Augustinian Order who kickstarted the Reformation with his 95 theses. His most important work was his book, *The Bondage of The Will*. This book was written to counter the arguments by Desiderus Erasmus, a famed humanist of the time. Luther argued, just as Augustine did, that man was unable to obey God, come to God in his own natural state. Since the fall in the garden of Eden, the will of man was in bondage to sin. Besides Martin Luther there were many other Reformers who generally subscribed to this view. The Reformers were careful to emphasize that they were not espousing innovative doctrine. They were simply explaining what the Bible already teaches. The most prominent of these was **John Calvin**. The genius of John Calvin was showing how different doctrines relate to one another to form a coherent whole. For instance, the doctrine of the preservation of the Saints also known as once saved, always saved, makes no sense if man is the author of a salvation. But if it is God who chooses those whom he will save from the very beginning, then it makes sense that those God choose will persevere to the very end. Calvin was one of the pioneers of what we today call systematic theology. This is not a new doctrine but it is a theology which has developed a very technical language of its own. Much of that language is not really suitable for a general setting such as this, but it is helpful when theologians are speaking to each other so they can speak precisely. This is a theology of the seminaries and the universities. His influence was so pervasive that for a while mainline Reformed Theology was simply referred to as Calvinism. After Calvin died a group of Protestants in Holland began to deviate from his systematic approach and questioned some of the key doctrines of the Reformers. Among them was a university professor by the name of Jacobus Arminius. Arminius was appointed a

professor of theology at the University of Leiden about 1603. His brief was to teach the Reformed faith as Calvinists would have it but he soon started having doubts. Eventually it became clear that he was teaching a different doctrine to his students privately compared to what he was saying publicly in the classroom. Arminius stressed the free will of man. That is to say man was able to come to God on his own terms. This caused a great deal of controversy. Arminius dies, then his follower took up the cause and argued for his viewpoints. To settle the dispute a church meeting was called at Dordrecht in Holland between 1618-1619. Today we refer to that meeting as the Synod of Dort. From this meeting came five points to counter the protesters. It is these five points which are generally referred to by Reformed theologians as the Doctrines of Grace or sometimes by others as the five Points of Calvinism. Calvin himself never summarized his theology in five points so it will be a mistake to think that Reformed Theology can be boiled down to five points essentially. That is not the case. The five points or the Doctrines of Grace as I prefer to call them were simply the response of the Reformed Theologians to the protesters in Holland at the time. They are generally referred to by the acrostic **TULIP**

Total depravity

Unconditional election

Limited atonement

Irresistible Grace

Perseverance of the Saints

I remind you all that this church was established to “promote the Reformed principles of the Church of England”. All these principles are described or implied in our church constitution which is the 39 Articles of Religion.

**Genesis 6:5 The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.**

**Jeremiah 17:9 The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.**

The doctrine of total depravity reflects the Reformed view of original sin. Original sin does not refer to the sin of Adam and Eve in the garden. When we say original sin we mean the all-encompassing consequences of it. It means that sin permeates every aspect of our being. Our minds are polluted with evil thoughts all the time, our natural heart inclination is to be evil all the time, our bodies fall ill and eventually we die because of the effects of original sin. Adam’s sin caused a complete and comprehensive corruption of all humanity. This is why Paul says,

**There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God “. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.” Romans 3:10-12**

The world sees differently. Speak to the average Joe and you will get many answers such as, “I’m not too bad; We are all God’s kids; I have a high moral compass; I’m basically good- not perfect, but on the whole I’m not doing too bad”. They look and say the really bad people are the Hitler's, the September 11

terrorists or the police officer who murdered so many innocent girls and so on. But me? Wicked? Get out of here- I am better than you. The Reformed view however is that the fall penetrates to the core- the heart, the will and the emotions. Therefore, what is required to conform us to the will of Christ is not merely a minor tweak by subtle adjustment but rather radical heart surgery, it requires regeneration from the inside This is only achieved by the power of the Holy Spirit.

## Article 10 Free Will

*The condition of man since the fall of Adam is such that he cannot turn and prepare himself by his own natural strength and good works for faith and for calling upon the name of the Lord. Hence we have no power to do good works which are pleasing and acceptable to God, unless the grace of God through Christ goes before us so that we may have a good will, and continues to work with us after we are given that good will.*

Man's moral power to turn to God or to convert himself is lost that is he is morally unable to do it. The natural man is dead in his sin.

**Ephesians 2:1-2 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, <sup>2</sup>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.**

## The Situation Today

Pelagius, of whom I spoke about earlier said man can be saved without grace. So if God says repent and be saved, we can do it on our own. Augustine insisted that the fall is so great that only God, and God alone can bring a change in a person's heart so he comes to faith in Christ. Augustine won the argument decisively. For Pelagius, Christianity is a religion of moral self-improvement. Since there is nothing wrong with our nature, the gospel is merely a message about how to improve our behaviour. To that end God provides a law in the Bible and a wonderful example in Christ. And that is all he provides, because it is all we need. With some solid encouragement, some moral direction, and a model to follow, we can all get on with being good as God requires. And of course, God will reward us if we do. After Pelagius died there emerged another the controversy which some people call semi-Pelagianism. Semi-Pelagianism says there is a fall, mankind is corrupted, we all need God's grace to be saved but there is enough goodness in man's heart to respond to God's offer of salvation so that we can be saved. This semi-Pelagianism is basically the doctrinal position of the Roman Catholic Church. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the vast majority of evangelicals also subscribe to this view, that is to say salvation is a cooperative effort between man and God command. This includes some popular teachers. Billy Graham for instance says (in reference to our salvation) God has done 99% of the work, and we only have to do the 1% just to receive it. If this is true then that 1% effort we make is the decisive factor in our salvation.

## Why Does It Matter?

**Ideas have consequences.** If you think that man has the moral ability to turn to God, then all effort at salvation should focus on persuading the sinner to make the right choices. The practicality is that churches that believe this start designing all sorts of programmes to push sinners towards salvation and

the preaching of the gospel gets watered down or even abandoned entirely. It manifests in various ways. For instance:

- There are numerous stories of churches having bouncy castles, churches spending millions on entertainment. I read a story where a church member complained that the church was not meeting her needs whereas another church member complained there were too many programmes and not enough emphasis on preaching the word. In her own words, 'we have every programme except the space programme'.
- Christian self-help books are a dime a dozen. Among the many problematic books include *The Prayer of Jabez*, *Believe in the God who Believes in You*, *Your best life now*, *Purpose-driven life* and so on. I am not saying these books do not have valuable insights in certain areas but at the heart of their message is a cooperative effort between God and man to get man saved ie if they even declare the terms of salvation itself. On page 57 of *The Purpose Driven Life* it says, "Living the rest of your life for the glory of God will require a change in your priorities, your schedule, your relationships, and everything else. It will sometimes mean choosing a difficult path instead of an easy one" (p57). This is all true, of course. True, Warren does require change. But biblical repentance is always and self-consciously a turning away specifically from *sin*, not just from amoral priorities or value neutral relationships. But there is no mention of either sin or repentance here. It leaves open the possibility that if you are a good boy you are doing great and can just wing it into heaven. ([Paul Alexander, Grace Covenant Baptist Church, Elgin Illinois](#)).

Furthermore, it raises the possibility that you can lose your salvation if you stop cooperating with God.

## Summary & Conclusion

The doctrine of Total Depravity is the Reformed expression of Original Sin. It says that the fall of Adam and Eve affected us all so that we are morally unable to respond to God's call and be saved without apriori God changing our hearts so we want to receive him. This doctrine is under attack from within and without the church. When taught correctly, along with the other Doctrines of Grace, it gives comfort to the believer and teaches a high view of God through his word. I close with this quotation from our church constitution:

## Article 9 Original or Birth-Sin

Original sin is not found merely in the following of Adam's example (as the Pelagians foolishly say). It is rather to be seen in the fault and corruption which is found in the nature of every person who is naturally descended from Adam. The consequence of this is that man is far gone from his original state of righteousness. In his own nature he is predisposed to evil, the sinful nature in man always desiring to behave in a manner contrary to the Spirit. In every person born into this world there is found this predisposition which rightly deserves God's anger and condemnation. This infection within man's nature persists even within those who are regenerate. This desire of the sinful nature, which in Greek is called *fronema sarkos* and is variously translated the wisdom or sensuality or affection or desire of the sinful nature, is not under control of God's law. Although there is no condemnation for those that believe and are baptized, nevertheless the apostle states that any such desire is sinful.

## References

1. [Why Pelagianism matters \(including for the Church of England\)](#) Matthew P. Roberts
2. [The 39 Articles of Religion in Modern English](#)
3. [Review of The Purpose-Driven Life](#) by Paul Alexander Pastor of Grace Covenant Baptist Church in Elgin, Illinois.
4. The Doctrines of Grace by James Montgomery Boice and Philip Ryken Pg 29, 69-89
5. Total Depravity Message by R.C Sproul, [Ligonier Ministries](#)