

The Sufficiency of Grace

by R.C. Sproul

The following is an excerpt from R.C. Sproul's book, [Willing to Believe](#)

The classic issue between Augustinian theology and all forms of semi-Pelagianism focuses on one aspect of the order of salvation (*ordo salutis*): What is the relationship between regeneration and faith? Is regeneration a monergistic or synergistic work? Must a person first exercise faith in order to be born again? Or must rebirth occur before a person is able to exercise faith? Another way to state the question is this: Is the grace of regeneration operative or cooperative?

Monergistic regeneration means that regeneration is accomplished by a single actor, God. It means literally a "one-working." Synergism, on the other hand, refers to a work that involves the action of two or more parties. It is a co-working. All forms of semi-Pelagianism assert some sort of synergism in the work of regeneration. Usually God's assisting grace is seen as a necessary ingredient, but it is dependent on human cooperation for its efficacy.

The Reformers taught not only that regeneration does precede faith but also that it must precede faith. Because of the moral bondage of the unregenerate sinner, he cannot have faith until he is changed internally by the operative, monergistic work of the Holy Spirit. Faith is regeneration's fruit, not its cause. According to semi-Pelagianism regeneration is wrought by God, but only in those who have first responded in faith to him. Faith is seen not as the fruit of regeneration, but as an act of the will cooperating with God's offer of grace. Evangelicals are so called because of their commitment to the biblical and historical doctrine of justification by faith alone. Because the Reformers saw *sola fide* as central and essential to the biblical gospel, the term evangelical was applied to them. Modern evangelicals in great numbers embrace the *sola fide* of the Reformation, but have jettisoned the *sola gratia* that undergirded it. Packer and Johnston assert:

"Justification by faith only" is a truth that needs interpretation. The principle of *sola fide* is not rightly understood till it is seen as anchored in the broader principle of *sola gratia*. What is the source and status of faith? Is it the God-given means whereby the God-given justification is received, or is it a condition of justification which is left to man to fulfill? Is it a part of God's gift of salvation, or is it man's own contribution to salvation? Is our salvation wholly of God, or does it ultimately depend on something that we do for ourselves? Those who say the latter (as the Arminians later did) thereby deny man's utter helplessness in sin, and affirm that a form of semi-Pelagianism is true after all. It is no wonder, then, that later Reformed theology condemned Arminianism as being in principle a

return to Rome (because in effect it turned faith into a meritorious work) and a betrayal of the Reformation (because it denied the sovereignty of God in saving sinners, which was the deepest religious and theological principle of the Reformers' thought). Arminianism was, indeed, in Reformed eyes a renunciation of New Testament Christianity in favour of New Testament Judaism; for to rely on oneself for faith is no different in principle from relying on oneself for works, and the one is as un-Christian and anti-Christian as the other. In the light of what Luther says to Erasmus, there is no doubt that he would have endorsed this judgment."

I must confess that the first time I read this paragraph, I blinked. On the surface it seems to be a severe indictment of Arminianism. Indeed it could hardly be more severe than to speak of it as "un-Christian" or "anti-Christian." Does this mean that Packer and Johnston believe Arminians are not Christians? Not necessarily. Every Christian has errors of some sort in his thinking. Our theological views are fallible. Any distortion in our thought, any deviation from pure, biblical categories may be loosely deemed "un-Christian" or "anti-Christian." The fact that our thought contains un-Christian elements does not demand the inference that we are therefore not Christians at all.

I agree with Packer and Johnston that Arminianism contains un-Christian elements in it and that their view of the relationship between faith and regeneration is fundamentally un-Christian. Is this error so egregious that it is fatal to salvation? People often ask if I believe Arminians are Christians? I usually answer, "Yes, barely." They are Christians by what we call a felicitous inconsistency.

What is this inconsistency? Arminians affirm the doctrine of justification by faith alone. They agree that we have no meritorious work that counts toward our justification, that our justification rests solely on the righteousness and merit of Christ, that sola fide means justification is by Christ alone, and that we must trust not in our own works, but in Christ's work for our salvation. In all this they differ from Rome on crucial points.

Packer and Johnston note that later Reformed theology, however, condemned Arminianism as a betrayal of the Reformation and in principle as a return to Rome. They point out that Arminianism "in effect turned faith into a meritorious work."

We notice that this charge is qualified by the words in effect. Usually Arminians deny that their faith is a meritorious work. If they were to insist that faith is a meritorious work, they would be explicitly denying justification by faith alone. The Arminian acknowledges that faith is something a person does. It is a work, though not a meritorious one. Is it a good work? Certainly it is not a bad work. It

is good for a person to trust in Christ and in Christ alone for his or her salvation. Since God commands us to trust in Christ, when we do so we are obeying this command. But all Christians agree that faith is something we do. God does not do the believing for us. We also agree that our justification is by faith insofar as faith is the instrumental cause of our justification. All the Arminian wants and intends to assert is that man has the ability to exercise the instrumental cause of faith without first being regenerated. This position clearly negates sola gratia, but not necessarily sola fide.

Then why say that Arminianism "in effect" makes faith a meritorious work? Because the good response people make to the gospel becomes the ultimate determining factor in salvation. I often ask my Arminian friends why they are Christians and other people are not. They say it is because they believe in Christ while others do not. Then I inquire why they believe and others do not? "Is it because you are more righteous than the person who abides in unbelief?" They are quick to say no. "Is it because you are more intelligent?" Again the reply is negative. They say that God is gracious enough to offer salvation to all who believe and that one cannot be saved without that grace. But this grace is cooperative grace. Man in his fallen state must reach out and grasp this grace by an act of the will, which is free to accept or reject this grace. Some exercise the will rightly (or righteously), while others do not. When pressed on this point, the Arminian finds it difficult to escape the conclusion that ultimately his salvation rests on some righteous act of the will he has performed. He has "in effect" merited the merit of Christ, which differs only slightly from the view of Rome.

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