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Is Divine Grace Really Unfathomable?

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Abstract.....	1
Introduction	2
I. Benevolence and Divine Grace	3
II. Grace in Special Revelation.....	4
III. The Unfathomable Nature of Grace in the Light of Sin.....	5
IV. The Fathomable Nature of Grace in Light of Divine Glory	7
Conclusion.....	10

Abstract

As it relates to the divine grace of God as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, the question can be surmised: was this divine revelation of grace as pertinently manifested through the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the atonement of sin - fathomable or unfathomable? Deeper questions that seem to be contradictions appear with both possible answers. If this grace was fathomable: why did the incarnation of Christ at his advent seem to be a strange thing to the first century Jews? And if it was fathomable - what assurance can we have that the prophecies of Christ have any credible validity seeing they claim to point to a naturally conceivable and interpretable historic event? This study will seek to show the scriptural probability of human fathomability in relation divine grace while at the same time proving the spiritual unfathomability of properly interpreting the divine act of grace i.e. the

cross, apart from special revelation. It will be to this joint-end that grace of God will be further exalted above even “that which the angels desire to look into” (1st Peter 1:12).

Introduction

The Holy Scriptures plainly reveal to us the transcendent nature of God. The blessed and beautiful Creator stands above, other than, and distinct from all he has made. God is a *supra opifex* – supremely above and beyond the entirety of creation. Scripture plainly testifies of this divine prerogative (Isaiah 55:8-9; Psalm 97:9; 108:5). It is utterly essential to approach the divine nature with the ascription of this attribute. Failing to embrace the absolute transcendence of God over creation puts one in danger of falling into two common errors. The first of these errors is pantheism – the doctrine which holds to the absolute immanence of God which relegates to be one with creation. The second of these errors is deism – the belief that God is so transcendental that he in no way interferes or intervenes in history or creations. Both of these fallacies should be avoided.

This doctrine of transcendence is essential in broaching the question as to whether divine grace is truly fathomable. Shrouded in the mystery of the godhead is his divine counsel (Acts 15:18). In this counsel of Father, Son, and Spirit, are contained all the immense and infinite treasures of eternal wisdom and knowledge. The mystery of this counsel makes antecedent that all due knowledge must be dependent upon a special grace of revelation bestowed upon the creature. As the Westminster Confession states in Chapter Seven:

The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto Him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of Him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God’s part, which He has been pleased to express by way of covenant.¹

This particular Standard is oft-quoted in Reformed Theology circles as it relates to the necessary and voluntary act of self-revelation on the part of God to his creation. Past theologians such as Turretin, Bavinck, and Kuyper, also give credence to the necessary act of condescension in revelation. But yet there still exists a need to

¹ Westminster Confession of Faith 7:1.

develop this theme of condescension and revelation further. This is because one could argue that the image of God as it has been embedded in man contains those divine elements of personality, intellect, memory, volition, will, and eternality. And if in this image exists the *aeternalis semen*, (Ecclesiastes 3:10) one could naturally deduce that some remnant of the pre-knowledge of divine grace may actually be present within the heart of every human being.

The remainder of this work will explore the following: if the image of God (prelapse and postlapse) contains a divine elements which gives man a hint of the grace to be revealed; and secondly: to what extent can man (pre and post-redemption) comprehensively and noetically understand the full measure of divine grace as it has been revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.

I. Benevolence and Divine Grace

Divine benevolence is the doctrine that God desires and wills that each of his creatures be as well-off as possible. This is a true and necessary doctrine that is consistent with Scripture. (Genesis 1:31; 2:18) Yet the doctrine of benevolence is often confused with or used synonymously with divine grace as revealed in the category of salvation. This error must be avoided at all costs. To do such diminishes the special role of divine grace while also homogenizing the two distinct wills, antecedent and consequent, into a concealed form of arminianism.

Benevolence should be understood as a subtext of common grace. (The term common grace is in fact a misnomer, but should be interpreted as a postlapsarian interpolation. It could be stated that every act of benevolence – after the fall is an act of grace seeing the justice that sinful creation actually deserves. But this understanding causes greater confusion than the misnomer itself. Therefore we will understand common grace as God's benevolence post-fall.) This benevolence falls squarely in the realm of God's prelapsarian antecedent will and also in his continuing acts of providence over creation. Both of these acts of common grace: the willing of happiness for creation and the necessary and continual acts by which this happiness is made available, are universal in scope and directed toward the entirety of creation. (Nehemiah 9: 6; Psalm 147:9; Acts 17:25) For example, God creating a world in which conditions for living are conducive to its inhabitants is an act of benevolence. The

divine act in re-creation of animal and plant life for the survival of life species is an act of benevolence. This is not grace, in the sense that the creature is unworthy of these provisions. But these are examples of common grace – benevolence bestowed upon all of creation.

II. Grace in Special Revelation

Divine grace is that special revelation and provision that has salvific redemption as its scope and goal. Divine grace encompasses the entire scope of God's revelation culminating in the covenant promises and culminates in the finished work of Christ in the atonement. And in this atonement are contained the six elements of salvation; foreknowledge, predestination, calling, justification, sanctification, and glorification. Divine grace is distinct and specifically designed for the eternal glory of God and the eternal good of the elect saints and angels.

The nature of divine grace is best understood through the lens of covenant theology. The Old Testament reveals these ‘declarative contracts’ between God and his people in the light of future grace and redemption. German Reformed Theologian, Zacharias Ursinus gives a fuller interpretation of this grace in light of the covenant by stating,

A covenant in general signifieth a mutual contract or agreement of two parties joined in the covenant, whereby is made a bond or obligation on certain conditions for the performance of giving or taking something, with addition of outward signs and tokens, for solemn testimony and confirmation that the compact and promise shall be kept inviolable.²

Covenant theology informs the creation of the divine act of mediation that is necessary to receive any benefits of grace. In all of the covenants (i.e. Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic) we are given by God the unequivocal prescription by which sinful men are able to enjoy the benefits and blessings of relationship with a holy God. These prescriptions (always being centered in the faithfulness of God's own character and immutability of nature) serve as foreshadows of the ultimate covenant which would be made in Christ in behalf of all of the elect. God makes covenant with the second Adam, Christ (who also serves as federal representative and head of humanity) that he will be the seed in which all nations of the earth

² “The Covenant of Grace by Dr. John Murray.” The Covenant of Grace by Dr. John Murray. N.p., n.d. Web. 20 June 2012. <http://www.the-highway.com/Covenant_Murray.html>.

will be blessed. (Galatians 3:16-17) This promise is fulfilled by the redemption that Christ secures for all believers who are joined to him by the union of faith. Divine Grace goes even further as it works through creation in the calling of the elect to faith. This is commonly referred to as special revelation. The Word of God as attested in the Scripture is a form of special revelation and embodiment of divine grace. Apart from the Scriptures, present believers would have no knowledge of either knowing or properly interpreting the act of divine redemption as accomplished by Christ through his death and resurrection. As the Apostle Paul states to Timothy, “And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.” (2 Timothy 3:15) The divine grace of the Scriptures reveal the personal character and nature of God just as the common grace of creation reveals the existence and power of God. And it is through this special revelation that the effectual call proceeds forth to the elect in bringing them to faith and justification by the working of the Holy Spirit. Just as benevolence provides the necessary conditions for the happiness of creation, divine grace creates the necessary environment of the redemption of creation.

III. The Unfathomable Nature of Grace in the Light of Sin

The spiritual dimensions of divine grace when magnified through the passion of Christ are utterly unfathomable. This unfathomability derives from the reality and presence of the very sin in which this passion of Christ expiates. The suffering of Deity in the person of Christ is the greatest manifestation of the monstrosity of the nature of sin. Immortality died on the cross of Christ. When Christ as Son of God, bore the wrath of God in bearing the full weight of sin in behalf of God’s elect, an unfathomable grace was shown in God sacrificing himself in atonement and propitiation for sin. As the classic Charles Wesley hymn states:

And can it be that I should gain
An int’rest in the Savior’s blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain?
For me, who Him to death pursued?

Amazing love! how can it be
That Thou, my God shouldst die for me?³

The noetic effect of sin furthers the unfathomability of divine grace to sinful man. The essence of sin is so pervasive that it naturally and negatively affects the entire being of man including the mind and intellect. This initial effect corrupts man's understanding of God. The reason of man immediately debases the divine godhead to something creaturely and carnal. Because of this noetic effect, God reminds his covenant people in light of their sin that he is a being unlike humans. (Psalm 50:21) One could also argue that Greek Orthodox practice of apophatic theology is a direct result of the noetic effects – our minds being so tainted with corruption that theology must first begin with what God is *not* before it can be properly deduced as to what he actually is. Theologian Stephen K. Moroney states:

The Fall brought about the perversion of human faculties, but it did not destroy those faculties. Human reasoning abilities are affected but not eliminated. This can be seen in the fact that the writers of Scripture often appeal to the minds of unbelievers by citing evidence on behalf of their claims, using logical inferences in building their case and speaking in the language and thought forms of those outside the faith.⁴

Apart from special revelation and special intervention to interpret that revelation, the mind of man is rendered incapable of grasping the realities of divine grace.

Romans 11:33-36

The conclusion to Romans chapter 11 is a spontaneous display of doxological sycophancy. After addressing the theological ramifications of God's predestined will of engrafting the Gentiles into the household of faith, he goes further to show the consequent benefits to the elect nation of Israel. The temporary casting off of Israel, as Paul states, will eventually lead to their very salvation. The concise summary of this chapter is that God has concluded all peoples, Jews and Gentiles, to a state of unbelief that his mercy

³ "And Can It Be That I Should Gain." By Charles Wesley. N.p., n.d. Web. 20 June 2012: <http://gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/hymns/umh363.stm>.

⁴ Stephen K. Moroney, *The Noetic Effects of Sin: A Historical and Contemporary Exploration of How Sin Affects Our Thinking* (Lexington Books, 2000).

toward all might be all the more exalted. It is upon meditation that Paul praises God:

O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? Or who hath been his counselor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory forever. Amen.

The reason for Paul's praise is three-fold. In verse 36 he extols the depth of riches of God's knowledge. The mind of God is an infinite ocean of wisdom, unplumbable by any angelic or human reasoning. This attribute of wisdom is reason for worship and adoration. (Revelation 5:12; 7:12) The next stem of praise is attached to God's sovereign ownership of divine counsel. (v35) There is no being, angelic or principalic, that God derives counsel from. It is only in the divine counsel of the godhead, Father, Son, and Spirit, that wisdom is found and corroborated. There exists an infallible exclusivity as it relates to divine knowledge. None apart from God himself knows his mind. And finally in verse 36, Paul ascribes glory to God for being the efficient, directing, and ultimate cause of all things. All things find their first and final cause in the counsel of God and nothing is left outside of that sphere.

IV. The Fathomable Nature of Grace in Light of Divine Glory

It should be understood from previous argument that a full understanding of the nature of divine grace is incomprehensible due to the transcendence of God and the noetic effect of sin. There still exists a need for further examination in determining to what extent the image of God and common grace provide in informing a soul that divine grace will be made available to the fallen creature. It is to this end that I will show that there is implanted both within the *divinitatis sensum* and embedded in natural creation, the fathomability of divine grace. While this fathomability should be viewed as distinct from special revelation, we will discover that the former is actually the principal substance of faith.

In order to first understand how divine grace is fathomable to a fallen human, we must first begin at the genesis of this grace. This origin begins in the eternal counsel of God. Before the creation of any being, God had already predetermined from eternity past, that he would create a world in which divine grace would be necessary. This

grace would be necessary, *not* because of any flaw in God's creation, but would be manifest for the praise of the glory of his grace. (Ephesians 1:6) divine grace was *not* made mandatory or even consequent as a result of man's sin, but it was the antecedent will of God from eternity past. Therefore when God created man, he created him *for the distinct purpose* of being a recipient of divine grace. And it can be naturally deduced, that in this purpose of receiving grace, God supplied man with every subconscious faculty necessary to comprehend that selfsame grace that man was created for, both post and pre-lapse.

The primary subconscious faculty by which the need for divine grace is actualized is in the conscience of man. There is much that can be said for the conscience and how it relates to the reception of grace, but for now we must recognize three concise points: the conscience gives man the power to judge the morality of his works before God (Romans 2:15); the conscience gives the knowledge of the existence of a righteous omnipotent creator, yet is without proper knowledge as to who this creator is (Romans 1:18-19); the goal of the law (natural and revealed) is to induce guilt by which one is able to recognize their need for divine grace (Romans 7:7). It is in the latter of these three that divine grace can begin to be actualized. Upon conviction of conscience of immoral acts and the natural guilt that proceeds, man at his core, has hope that some form of divine grace (i.e. reconciliation) will be provided.

This is best seen in the Genesis narrative. After their initial sin, Adam and Eve did two unique things. They both sewed fig leaves for a covering and then hid from the presence of God. Their consciences had become convicted of breaking the law of God and now they were exhibiting a hope of covering and protection. They subconsciously recognized a need for grace – albeit at this moment they were attempting to merit grace by their own fruitless works. In these attempts we see that they recognized a specific need of grace – a gift that they did not deserve. What is most unique is that God, through providence, would ubiquitously provide the very fig leaves of covering and the trees for hiding necessary for Adam and Eve. Thus it is portrayed that the very means of their attempted expiation would also itself be a gift of grace.

Proverbs 30:1-4

We encounter a unique passage of scripture that reveals the role of creation in testifying of divine grace. Proverbs 30, written by an unknown author who refers to himself as Agur son of Jakeh, provides insight that semblances of divine grace are manifest through the very creation itself. In verse two of three of the passage we read in verses two through four,

Surely I am more brutish than any man, and have not the understanding of a man. I neither learned wisdom, nor have the knowledge of the holy. Who hath ascended up into heaven, or descended? Who hath gathered the wind in his fists? Who hath bound the waters in a garment? Who hath established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and what is his son's name, if thou canst tell?

This passage serves as a striking portrait of the role of creation in testifying of divine grace *ante speciali revelationem*. While the words of the writing are inspired of the Holy Spirit, the author writes within a context that is *not* inspired by any special revelation. Agur states that he is indeed ‘brutish’ and ‘without understanding’ and having ‘neither learned wisdom, nor knowledge of the holy.’ The author, for the sake of extolling the *revelationem procedens a creatura*, portrays the role of an unenlightened heathen, outside of the covenant promises of God. Yet despite this position that he chooses to take, he admits that through natural theology, there exists questions as to the nature of God. These questions (either being directed toward the inner conscience or a straw man, it is unclear) first relate to God’s power and finally to God’s person. It is in this final question that the author asks concerning God, “What is his son’s name, if thou canst tell.” Ancient near East mythology portrays the sons of the gods as those human kingly vice regents (image bearers) of the gods on earth. (See Atrahasis Epic) This suggests that that the very creation itself testifies of the need of divine immanence and mediation which would be revealed through the person of God’s Son, thus typifying the grace of God to be revealed in Christ. C.S. Lewis alluded to this typology by stating,

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God sent the human race what I call good dreams: I mean those queer stories scattered all through the heathen religions about a god who dies and comes to life again and, by his death, has somehow given new life to men.⁵

Conclusion

The full recognition, comprehension, and understanding of divine grace in unfathomable. The believer will spend an eternity knowing the depth, width, breadth, and width of that most high divine love that has been displayed in Christ. And even now the angels desire to look deeper into all the elements of God's work of atonement. But yet there is an element of that same grace that has been with man from his creation. Man, at his core knows that he was made for God. And even after the fall, man's desire for reconciliation is aroused, making the inception of divine grace to be expected and fathomable.



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⁵ C. S. Lewis, “The Shocking Alternative,” *Mere Christianity* (London: Collins, 1956), 50.