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**Should We Abandon Our Reformed Theologies
of Grace in the Face of Habitual Congregational Sin?**

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Abstract

The issue of sin does not only affect individuals, it also permeates all aspects of human life and as such has a ripple effect, flooding over the community as a whole. This article endeavours to answer the question: Should we abandon our Reformed theologies of grace in the face of habitual congregational sin? In order to obtain clear answers to this question habitual congregational sin or a people's sin; punishment; repentance; and deliverance will be discussed to reach a conclusion on this matter.

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Introduction

Christians are saved through the grace of Christ. This is the favour God bestows on His people. Through this grace, God forgives our sins and enlightens our minds. This grace is further defined by two adjectives: unearned and undeserved (Gould 2009)². It is divine love that made the first move to reconcile with man, the sinner to God, the righteous judge. God freely provided the way for man's return, through the atonement that met all the demands of God's righteousness and justice. Love was essentially the motive at the heart of atonement and not the other way round (Reid, 1980:292)³. It can, however, not be denied that even though Christians have been saved by Christ, they have not ceased to sin. This raises the question whether those who are saved, yet habitually sin can still be regarded Christians or showing the signs of being lost.

1 John 1:8 and 2:1 indeed confirms that as Christians we do still sin and 1 John 2:4 and especially 1 John 3:6-10 make it plain that whoever professes Christ, yet continues to sin are not Christians at all, but deceived souls on their way to hell. The Bible is replete with examples of how whoever lives sinfully will not inherit the Kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9-10, Gal. 5:19-21; James 2:14; Heb. 10:26-39; Heb. 12:14; Jude 4; Rev. 21:8; Rev. 22:15 and Matt. 7:23).

A. Discussion

It is very difficult to define *grace*, because to do so would most likely require describing the Christianity as a whole, because of interrelatedness of divine grace with the other doctrines of Christianity – since they all directly or otherwise attest of God's acts of grace. The common man, however, understand grace in a very pragmatic sense as measured by the quality and quantity of one's life, as a gift of God; as the mercy and kindness of God; and the security God affords humanity (Melancthon, 2003: 8-9)⁴.

This is also the case with the definition of sin. Theologians describe sin in various ways, some better than others. Some define it

²GOULD, J. 2009. Deserving, and the catechism understanding of grace. Summer 2009. Vol. 91. No.3. Chicago. Illinois. Anglican Theological review Publisher.

³REID, W.S. 1980. Justification by faith according to John Calvin. *Westminster theological journal*, 42(2):290-307.

⁴MELANCHTHON, M.J. 2003. The grace of God and the equality of human person. *A journal of theology*, 42(1), Spring.

as the turning away from the Creator, whilst others define sin as a violation of God's law (Borcherding 1983)⁵. Moller (1997)⁶, however, argues that sin means evil (in Greek: *poneria*, cf. Acts 3:26) for it bears witness to a corrupt and base spirit and to the devils disposition transplanted into the heart. It also means failure or not reaching the goal, in the sense that it causes man to fail to reach God's purpose. As such, sin is regarded as lawlessness and disobedience to the will of God. Vorster (2010:87)⁷ adds that sin is not a physical inheritance, but inevitability because human beings live outside of true communion with God and humankind. Full communion with God will, therefore, only be realised at the *parousia*.

Turnau (2002)⁸ says that the Reformational understanding of sin, by contrast, is much more robust. Sin is so powerful and inescapable that we desperately need God's intervening grace. In evaluating Lovelace (1979)⁹, Turnau argues that Lovelace understood sin as not something that isolates acts of disobedience but as something more like a "psychological complex". Therefore Turnau further argues that sin is "an organic network of compulsive attitudes, beliefs and behavior deeply rooted in our alienation from God" (cf. Rom. 7:7-25; Gal. 5:17). This compulsive heart attitude is alleviated, but not eradicated, when we become Christians. We will continue to struggle with that compulsive, rebellious part of our hearts throughout our Christian lives. It is also something over which we will never have complete control (and so we constantly need to acknowledge God's mercy and depend on His grace in repentance).

In light of the above, the question still remains whether we should abandon our Reformed theologies of grace in the face of habitual congregational sin. Congregational sin, in this regard, could

⁵ BORCHERDING, A.W. 1983. Schleiermacher and the Lutheran confession on sin and grace: confession on sin and grace. *Concordia journal*, May .86-93.

⁶ MOLLER, FP. 1997. From Sin to Salvation: Words of Light and Life. vol.3. Pretoria. JL van Schaick Publishers.

⁷ VORSTER, N. 2010. Calvin's modification of Augustine's doctrine of original sin. *Die skriflig*, 44(3):71-89.

⁸ TURNAU, T.A. 2002. Reflecting theologically on popular culture as meaningful: the role of sin, grace, and general revelation. *Calvin Theological Journal* 37. .

⁹ Richard F. Lovelace attributes this heritage to increasingly rationalistic tendencies that characterized

the eighteenth and nineteenth century Protestant theology. See his *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 87-88.

also be referred to as the sin of the nation. It is important to realise that the Bible is full of nations that sinned against the Lord and such sinful acts were, in most cases, condemned by the prophet sent by God. Often the relevant nation would be blind to how they are sinning against God, because sin had become a habitual part of life.

B. The Sin of the Nation

It is important to keep in mind that God's people are, over the course of history, a nation, a monarchy and a supra-natural church. Although God is depicted differently in the Old Testament than He is in the New Testament, He remains the same and does not change (Wilcock, 2008: 89)¹⁰. This in fact tells us that God has been guiding His people, throughout history, with His law that He conveyed to His people through the prophets and apostles. This leads to the conclusion that God's nation should always adhere to His commands, for them to be morally pleasing before God. Sherbondy (2006:3)¹¹ attests to this by explaining how God instituted a variety of laws and rules to teach His people proper behaviour. Many of these are cited both in the Old and New Testament. Among these are those that God set down to direct His people in the various rituals of sacrifice, worship, festivals as well as personal and social relationship between individuals and with the tribes they would encounter in their lives.

In contrast to the above, God's people is often seen to be rebelling against Him. One example of this is found in the Old Testament in Judges 10:6-12:15, when Israel as God's nation did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. It is important to note that in the abovementioned chapters of Judges Israel did evil before God not only in Judges 2:11, but also in Judges 10:6. In spite of being delivered into the hands of other nations seven times (the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines, the Sidonians, the Amalekites and the Maonites), the Israelites continued to do evil before God. One could think that God continually coming to their rescue, in His great mercy, they had nothing to worry about and could continue to sin against God.

¹⁰ WILCOCK, M. 2008. The message of Judges: grace abounding. Vicar of St Nicholas' church, Durham: Intersity Press.

¹¹ SHERBONDY, R. 2006. Basic doctrine regarding sin; international Bible. Grand Rapids, Mi.: Zondervan Publishing House.

Comparatively, on Israel's journey to lay claim to Canaan they wandered in the desert for thirty eight years during which time hundreds and thousands died - mostly of old age. Yet, they still provoked the Lord with their complaints against the Lord and Moses (Num. 21:4-9)¹². This was, of course, not only a single individual provoking the Lord, but the whole nation – completely disregarding the grace the Lord had shown them in the past.

C. The Punishment

As is evident with Israel, God does not allow the sinful actions of His people go unpunished and confirms that God always expects His people to follow His commands. In Numbers 21 He punished His people by sending venomous snakes among them and many Israelites died. It is important to note, for a clear understanding of these events that God's judgement wasn't as random as it may appear. The snakes that Lord sent in among them were a symbol of the ultimate enemy of mankind, Satan. It was also of particular significance to the Israelites, who had not long before fled from Egypt and were as such well-versed in Egyptian symbolism (Duguid 2006:263)¹³. One would, therefore, agree with Duguid (2006:263) that the death of the Israelites in the desert was a result of their sins and not God's failure to deliver on His promises to them.

Jamieson *et al* (1997)¹⁴ add that since the world belongs to God, He has the absolute right pronounce judgement on any nation that sin against Him and as such whoever sins against God is subject to His righteous judgement. In other words, any nation that rejects God and his Son Jesus Christ are under the judgement of God. We are even told of how Jesus lamented God's coming judgement on the cities that rejected Christ and even more so for the fact that they had received even greater, dramatic and straightforward revelations about Jesus, yet refused to repent (cf. Matt. 11:20-24) (Blomberg, 1992)¹⁵. It was the same for Sodom and Gomorrah, in Gen. 18:16-19:29. God was,

¹² KEDDIE, G.J. 1992. According to promise: the message of the book of Numbers. United Kingdom: Evangelical Press.

¹³ DUGUID, I.M. 2006. God's presence in the wilderness. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

¹⁴ JAMIESON, R., FAUSSET, A.R. & BROWN, A. 1997. A commentary, critical and explanatory, on the Old and New Testament. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems.

¹⁵ BLOMBERG, C.L. 1992. Matthew. The new American commentary, vol. 22. Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press.

however, willing to spare Sodom if He there were even 10 people who were righteous, i.e. He would have preserved the unrighteous for the sake of the righteous. The sinful activity of Sodom and Gomorrah was serious, habitual, lawless and sexual in nature. These cities' indulgence in this activity of sin ultimately brought down upon them the severest of judgement (cf. Koukl, 2003)¹⁶. Despite the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah, Ross: (2005)¹⁷ argues that one should remember that although God is a God of justice, He is also God of mercy. This chapter of Genesis attests to thereto, since the Lord appeared to be willing to spare Sodom and Gomorrah for the sake of the righteous.

It must be noted that God exacts two different kinds of punishment, the temporal and the eternal. 2 Peter 3 explains how eternal punishment pertains to people who don't repent of their wicked ways. Judges 9:1-10:5 relates God's displeasure at Shechem for making Abimelech king and how He sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem for their rejection of truth and integrity. Abimelech ruled for three years and then, in His great mercy, God made Jonathan king that truth and integrity may once again be restored to this nation. God punishes those who sin against Him in preparation for the future. In the Old Testament it was to prepare His people for the coming of the Messiah and today He punishes sin that His people may turn away from an immoral life and inherit eternal life.

D. Repentance and Deliverance

Repentance is one of the ways that reflects true remorse for sin. John's message in John 3:2 centred around repentance and Jesus also already speaks of this in His early teachings about sin. The manner in which the word "repent" was used by both John and Jesus was an imperative, grounded in the inaugurated eschatological reality of the nearness of kingdom (Tuner, 2008)¹⁸. Furthermore, as Shim

¹⁶ KOUKL, G. 2003. What was the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah? Signal Hill, CA ,USA: Stand A Reason ARR.

¹⁷ ROSS, A.P. 2005. Creation and blessing: a guide to the study and exposition of Genesis. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

¹⁸ TUNER, D.L. 2008. Matthew: Baker exegetical commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

(2007:6)¹⁹ states, repentance is the basic requirement, in the teachings of Jesus Christ and His apostles in Scripture, to receive forgiveness for sins and is also necessary for eternal salvation.

In addition thereto, Sproul (2010:3)²⁰ argues that when Jesus used the word “repent”, He was calling on all believers to be one in repentance. Kyle (2009)²¹ explains how one of the Reformation slogans is *ecclesia semper reformans, semper reformanda* or reformed and always reforming. It refers to a constant, ever improving, adherence to God’s word in all things. Kyle goes on to relate how Martin Luther, in the first of his ninety-five theses, said “Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ ...willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance”.

It should also be noted that sin is often cyclical in nature, i.e. God’s people sin, they are then punished, upon which they cry for help and then God comes to their rescue. It would seem that they could only repent of their sins, if they were punished first.

As mentioned in the above discussion, God is God of mercy and showed mercy to the people of Israel throughout their history. Macky (2004:537²²) relates how in Jer. 18:8 God was willing to forgive the nation if they repented of their sins. In this passage the nation is called to abandon their wicked ways and then God would relent. In other words if the nation repents of their sins, the penalty that God imposed would then be lifted. Macky (2004) further argues that they had to realise that there can be no relation between previous enjoyment of divine blessings or awareness of divine promises and the guarantee of future blessings, without continuous obedience.

The above pattern is also clearly evident in Judges 11:4-11 when the Israelites pled with Jephthah to be their leader and cried to the Lord for assistance. Wilcock (2008:111) explains that the Lord’s response to rebellion was retribution and mercy upon repentance. Even so, it should be noted that the Lord also introduces another element to this cycle of repentance and mercy, to show His people

¹⁹ SHIM, M.S. 2007. The doctrine of perseverance in reformed perspective. Pretoria: University of Pretoria. (Thesis.)

²⁰ SPROUL Jr., R.C. 2010. Repentance and reformation. *Tabletalk magazine*. www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/repentance-and-reformation Date of Access: 13 Sept. 2012.

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²² MACKAY, J.L. 2004. Jeremiah: an introduction and commentary. Vol 1: Chp 1-20. Great Britain. Mentor Imprint.

that He cannot be controlled by them. Furthermore, as Keddie (1992:144) states, sometimes it is not the fear of punishment or rebuke that make people obey God, but rather the inner realisation of the holiness and perfection of God. It is seeing God and knowing Him in the perfect excellence of His self-revelation that draws believing hearts into earnestly seeking to be holy, as He is holy (1 Peter 1:15-16).

Eldredge (2009)²³ defines deliverance as God coming to someone's rescue in times of trouble. According to Volf (2005:385)²⁴ people often turn to faith when things go wrong, from which God then deliver them. The tradition of God's deliverance of His children, through His divine blessings, was already established in the Old Testament and continued in the New Testament through his Son Jesus Christ. Volf (2005) adds that God delivers His people even when they fail morally. This message is central to the great act of deliverance in the New Testament, the death and the resurrection of Christ. God is the forgiving God who, as the Lamb of God, shoulders our transgressions. In other words, the Lord's anger is quenched by His mercy and He delivers His people, but only when they acknowledge their sins and repent.

Miller (1975:248)²⁵ argued, some decades ago, how there are two modes to the positive work of God, each reflected in the Old Testament and the New Testament. One is salvation, God's act of deliverance and the other is blessing, the on-going regular work of God to provide and care for life. Boda (2009:64-65)²⁶ asserts that deliverance normally comes once sin has been acknowledged and confessed. Another key point is that God's merciful forgiveness is also in preservation of His people.

This means that both individual believers and God's people as a whole are duty bound to show their gratitude towards God by adhering to his Word, since they have indeed been saved and continue

²³ ELDREDGE, J. 2009. God as a deliverer. <http://blog.ransomedheart.com/god-as-deliverer>. Available: Ransomed Heart Ministries. Date of access: 13 Sept. 2012.

²⁴ VOLFF, M. 2005. God at work: *Word & World*. Vol. 25, Number 4. Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, USA. Yale University Press.

²⁵ MILLER, J.R. 1975. The blessings of God: an interpretation of Numbers 6:22-27. Sheffield. University of Sheffield. Department of Biblical Studies.

²⁶ BODA, M.J. 2009. A severe mercy: sin and its remedy in the Old Testament. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.

to receive God’s blessings. Believers must, therefore, live a life of gratitude and come to learn that God’s mercy is not a blessing to be taken advantage of and licence for His children to transgress the teachings of his Word.

Conclusion

The question initially raised was whether we should abandon the Reformed theologies of grace in the face of habitual congregational sin. The analysis of this matter shows that the answer could only be no. If God’s grace is abandoned, because of habitual sin, then it automatically means that the five *solas*²⁷ of the Reformed faith are no longer essential. We only need read the Word of God to know who He is and what He expects of us. We also need His grace to keep from suffering His punishment and that is only possible when we have faith in Him alone, through His Son our Lord Jesus Christ. This enables to praise Him, by living lives of gratitude as His people.

In addition, God also requires His people to remain obedient to Him. Salvation through grace is not a licence to continue in sin as though God’s grace makes it permissible. God’s people are also called to be holy, as God is holy (cf. 1 Pet. 1:16). The more pertinent question would then become: How could God’s people abandon God’s grace in the face of sin?

Continued obedience is required for God’s people to enjoy the grace that God bestowed unto them through his Son, Jesus Christ. God’s grace does not make it permissible to sin. Paul makes it clear, in Romans 6:1-4, by asking whether we should continue to sin so that grace may continue and then replying “by no means”. God’s forgiveness does not make sin less serious. Jesus paid with His life that we may be forgiven. The access to God’s mercy must not become an excuse for careless living and moral laxness.



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²⁷ “Sola Scriptura” (Scripture Alone); “Sola Gratia” (Grace Alone); “Sola Fide” (Faith Alone); “Solus Christus” (Christ Alone); and “Soli Deo Gloria” (To God Alone Be Glory)