

THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE

Crossway Chapel is confessionally Reformed in its soteriology. That is to say, Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience lead us to affirm God's sovereignty over all aspects of our personal salvation. As expressed in our Doctrinal Statement, we believe that "before the foundation of the world, [God] chose in Christ those whom He graciously regenerates, saves, and sanctifies, foreordaining that the rest remain in their sin to their just condemnation (Acts 13:48; Romans 8:28-30; Ephesians 1:4-11; 2:1-7; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Timothy 1:9; 2:10; 1 Peter 1:1-2)." This gracious choosing or election is granted "to totally depraved sinners" and is not a response "to any initiative on their own part nor to God's anticipation of what they might do by their own will, but is solely of His sovereign grace and mercy (Ephesians 1:4-7; Titus 3:4-7; 1 Peter 1:2)." Having graciously elected dead sinners, God sovereignly calls them to Himself, just as Jesus called Lazarus from the tomb, with the result that the dead are raised miraculously to new life. And sealing them with the Holy Spirit, God commits Himself to the provision of sustaining grace so that those chosen and made alive in Christ will endure faithfully till the end and inherit their reward in the new heavens and the new earth.

Therefore, we assert in our Doctrinal Statement that "salvation is wholly of God by grace on the basis of the redemption of Jesus Christ, the merit of His righteousness and shed blood, and not on the basis of human merit or works (John 1:12; Ephesians 1:7; 2:8-10; 1 Peter 1:18-19)." We are blind, yet we *ought* to see; we are dead, yet we *ought* to live. And the good news of sovereign grace is that ours is a God who forgives through the cross, and who works miracles, graciously causing the blind to see and the dead to be raised to new life. Our seeing and our living—our believing in God and our choosing Christ and our pursuit of righteousness—are crucial and indispensable elements of our salvation. But Crossway Chapel believes that they are derivative from and dependent on the decisive works of God first to choose us, then to cause us to see and to be made alive, and finally to sustain that new life all the way to the end.

These realities are sometimes referred to collectively as "Calvinism," or the "doctrines of grace." And they have been the objects of no little controversy throughout church history. Countless volumes have been written and words spoken in criticism and in defense of the doctrines of grace. In particular, several helpful, clear, well-reasoned, biblically rooted, and theologically compelling defenses of the positions we hold at Crossway Chapel have been produced. It is not our intention in this brief reflection to try to improve upon such defenses. (If you are interested in thinking through the doctrines of grace more thoroughly, the ministry staff at Crossway Chapel would be happy to direct you to useful resources.) Rather, "sitting on the shoulders of giants" who have labored before us, we will attempt less to argue *that* the doctrines of grace are true, and more to offer reasons *why* such doctrines, if true, are also good and beautiful and fitting for us. Specifically, we will seek to provide some preliminary answers to the question, How do the doctrines of grace (or any doctrine for that matter) deepen one's

worship of and love for God, and how do they help one to minister in love and humility and self-sacrifice for the good of others? We are to strive not for propositional truth alone, but for truth that draws us into deeper love for God and deeper love for our neighbors—this is, after all, the only kind of truth there is. So do the doctrines of grace empower and sustain such twofold love for God and neighbor, and if so, how?

These broad questions are of particular significance because Calvinism, and Reformed theology more broadly, is frequently associated with two very sad distortions of the Christian faith. On the one hand, Reformed theology is, for many, linked to a cold and rigid intellectual ethos that manifests itself in arrogance and elitism. In turn, it is not surprising to find this ethos in the midst of divisions, dissensions, factiousness, and church splits. On the other hand, a strong affirmation of the sovereignty of God over individual salvation might seem to preclude the need for evangelism and to deaden a sense of urgency for witness and prayer. This appears, in fact, to have been the case in the “hyper-Calvinism” that proved to be such an obstacle to individuals like Andrew Fuller and William Carey in the beginning days of the “modern missions era.”

We must admit from the outset that the doctrines of grace have often and lamentably been wielded in ways that have caused harm to individuals and to the church. But it may be that such sad chapters in the life of the church arise not from the doctrines of grace themselves but from the distortion and/or abuse of them. Indeed, it is our conviction that the doctrines of grace—if rightly grasped with the mind and rightly leaned upon with the heart and rightly wielded in one’s life—actually undergird and encourage and nourish our love for God and our love for neighbor. In the following, we will suggest four ways in which they might do so.

First, affirming and meditating upon the sovereignty of God over all aspects of our personal salvation is an effort to deepen our wonder at and delight in the love of God for His people—that is, for us. This is so for at least two reasons. In the first place, if any of us come to saving faith in Christ, if any of us have truly seen God with the result that we savor Him, if any of us have hearts that love the Lord and serve others in grace and truth, then it is only because a miracle of divine grace has occurred in our lives. When, in speaking of conversion, the Bible uses metaphors such as the raising of dead people to new life and the granting of sight to those who were blind (see, e.g., Colossians 2:13; 2 Corinthians 4:3–6), part of the point is to underline that our faith in Christ and the new life that springs from it are the result of divine intervention and not our own self-effort. Dead people do not raise themselves to new life. It is the power of God alone that resurrects from the dead. But such an act of power is also an act of love. God raises dead people to new life *because He loves them* (Ephesians 2:4–7; cf. 1 John 4:9–10). The miracle of new life is, therefore, a testament to the power of divine love. If we are believers in Christ, we are objects of omnipotent love. To affirm God’s sovereign work in our salvation is to hold up this omnipotent love for our deepened awe and adoration. From a different perspective, when God chooses to set His love upon “dead” people so as to raise them miraculously to new life, the “deadness” of those individuals is not biological so much as spiritual. That is, God chooses to set His love upon people who have no spiritual affection for Him, who have no love for Him, who are, in fact, His enemies by nature (Romans 5:8). This is the truest and deepest mystery and marvel of election. God’s election is unconditional. He chooses to save “dead” sinners. His choice is thus an expression of (1) His great compassion and pity upon those who are helpless to rescue themselves, and (2) His great mercy toward and love for those who are

faithless and loveless toward Him. The doctrine of unconditional election is the truth that the pure and holy and righteous and infinitely glorious Creator and King of the universe has freely and gladly chosen to save and to love helpless worms and wanton harlots. And He loves such ones with a particular covenant love, as a husband loves his wife with a particular covenant love that separates her from every other woman in the world.

Therefore, when in Ephesians 1:4–6 Paul glories so greatly in the wonder of God's electing and predestinating grace, it is not because Paul loves esoteric and abstract theological conundrums. Rather, it is chiefly because he can barely fathom the wonder of an infinitely worthy and beautiful God choosing unworthy people like us to be His beloved bride. The doctrines of grace provide a wonderful window through which to see and to savor the glorious reality that is God's love for His own.

Second, the doctrines of grace function to chasten our pride and self-sufficiency and to promote humble dependence upon God. The Apostle Paul expresses the very center of the doctrine of election in 1 Corinthians 1: "God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong . . . that no man should boast before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, that, just as it is written, 'Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.'" The reality of unconditional election invalidates every reason for human boasting. We are ever-desperate, ever-needy, ever-dependent on God's gracious initiative and intervention. And ours is a God who loves to intervene for the good of helpless people, rescuing them and raising them to new life. Seeing this combination—our need and God's ability and delight to fill it—fuels awe and wonder at our salvation, even as it deepens our love for the God who accomplishes it freely out of His good pleasure. And, when truly embraced and hoped in, the combination cultivates a more humble, more broken, and more deeply joyful heart. Such a heart would not dream of wielding the very truth that produces it to exalt itself and cut others down, or as an identity badge to determine who is "in" and "out." Indeed, such a heart is the true heart for love and for self-sacrificial service.

Third, the doctrines of grace can encourage love for neighbor by motivating us to pray for lost souls. This might, at first, seem counter-intuitive. At the broadest level, we might be tempted to ask, "If God has sovereignly ordained all that takes place, why pray for anything specific to happen?" Doesn't the sovereignty of God negate the need for prayer? More specifically, if God has chosen whom He will and will not save, if Christ has died for His elect so that they will surely be saved, then why do we need to pray for the salvation of any? There are at least two ways to respond to such questions.

One response is simply to note that Scripture often juxtaposes the sovereign purposes and eternal decrees of God with the prayer of His people, even offering the former as the *basis* for the latter. To take just one example, in John 17:1, Jesus prays, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you." To understand the logic of this prayer, we must clarify the meaning and purpose of the "hour" to which Jesus refers. While much more may be said about this "hour," we can say, at least, that it refers to the time of Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion (see, e.g., John 7:30; 8:20; 13:1; 16:32), and it is, in God's eternal and sovereign plan, for the purpose of the mutual glorification of the Son and the Father (see esp. John 12:23, 27–28). Thus, when Jesus

says in John 17:1, "Father, the hour has come," He is saying, in effect, "Father, the time has come for Me to be arrested and handed over to death, and this You have sovereignly purposed for the mutual glorification of Me and You." This is what makes Jesus' actual request to God in next line of John 17:1 so remarkable. Having said, "Father, the hour has come for Your plan to take effect," Jesus then asks God the Father to do what He has been planning to do all along—namely, to "glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you." Because of God's sovereign purpose to glorify Son and Father together, therefore Jesus prays that God would work out His purpose to glorify both Son and Father. The sovereignty of God doesn't discourage Jesus from praying; it encourages Him to pray. It drives Him to prayer, even as it informs His prayer.

The reason the sovereignty of God, when rightly perceived, is no discouragement from prayer but actually the basis and motivation for it can perhaps be clarified by noting a second response to the notion that God's sovereignty obviates the need for prayer: Prayer is a means of grace. Biblically speaking, prayer is not in competition with or a substitute for or something added to sovereign grace at work in the world, but the means through which sovereign grace works. Thus, consider Jesus' declaration to Peter that He has *prayed* for Peter and is therefore confident of Peter's restoration after his failures during the events of the Passion (Luke 22:31–32): Did Peter repent and turn and experience restoration because of God's grace or Jesus' prayer? Or when Hezekiah *prays* for the deliverance of Jerusalem during the Assyrian siege (Isaiah 37:14–20) and God promises to deliver Jerusalem "because you have prayed to me concerning Sennacherib king of Assyria" (Isaiah 37:21), though God had *already* promised to destroy Assyria and protect Jerusalem (Isaiah 31:8–9): Was the deliverance a result of divine promise and intervention or Hezekiah's prayer? Or when Jesus assures us in Matthew that, in the sovereign plan of God, "this gospel of the kingdom *will* be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations" (Matthew 24:14), yet earlier in Matthew Jesus tells us, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore *pray* earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (Matthew 9:37–38): Is the full and successful proclamation of the gospel dependent on God's sovereignly purposing it or our praying for missionaries to complete the work? The answer to all of these questions is, "Yes." We do not need to choose between God's promises and our prayers, between God's rule and our requests, between God's sovereignty and our supplications. The latter are, in God's wisdom and goodness, the means through which the former work.

Several important and complex questions are likely to come to mind here, but this rather extended discussion of the relationship between God's sovereignty and prayer is meant primarily to demonstrate that there is no *necessary* conflict between the sovereignty of God over human salvation and a burden to pray for the lost. Indeed, it is a false dichotomy to suggest that *either* God sovereignly saves individuals or we must pray for their salvation. If God has chosen whom He will and will not save, if Christ has died for His elect so that they will surely be saved, why pray for the salvation of any? Because God means to make His election known and to save those for whom Christ died through the channel of prayer.

In fact—and this highlights the fourth way in which the doctrines of grace encourage and nourish love—the sovereignty of God in human salvation is not only the basis and motivation to pray for the lost; it is also a reason for confidence and courage in evangelism and mission. Perhaps the most stunning example of this in Scripture is found

in Acts 18. When Paul faced opposition and threat during his ministry in Corinth, the Lord said to him in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, *for I have many in this city who are my people*" (Acts 18:10). God had many in pagan Corinth who were His people, who were, that is, chosen for salvation. Therefore, nothing could ultimately thwart Paul in the effort to proclaim the gospel to them. Paul is reminded of the reality of election in order to embolden him to continue risking his neck for the sake of love and to stay the course when faced with trial. The mission cannot fail. The blood of Christ was not spilt in vain. Christ *will* have—He *will* save—His own. The heartaches (rejection, awkwardness, abandonment, isolation, frustration, futility) and dangers (threats to possessions, family, friends, life itself) involved in laying down our lives in love for others and for the glory of God are numerous and weighty. We do not have the moral fortitude to withstand them. But steadfast hope in, not merely awareness of, the promises of a sovereign God and His indomitable purposes in election and calling is the power that frees us to face these trials willingly and eagerly. In other words, knowledge of God's sovereignty in human salvation exists for the purpose of ministering to the poor, laying our lives down for the oppressed, and loving the lost.

For the Christian, there is no ultimate decision that needs to be made between love and truth, for they are both part of our singular pursuit of the God who is love (1 John 4:8) and who is truth (John 14:6). The two are inseparable and assume each other. If "love rejoices with the truth" (1 Corinthians 13:6), it is, at least in part, because the truth inspires and empowers and sustains love. We have tried briefly to outline four ways in which we believe that the truth of God's sovereignty in individual salvation inspires, empowers, and sustains love for both God and neighbor. It is our hope and prayer that the teaching and preaching of the doctrines of grace at Crossway Chapel will function in precisely this way, so that our wonder at and delight in and humility before God's shocking electing love for us may go continually deeper, and our pursuit of and self-sacrificial love for the lost may be continually fueled.

