

The Unconditional Freeness of Grace

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James Denney, the beloved Scottish theologian and New Testament scholar, used to say that in the ideal church all our theologians would be evangelists and our evangelists theologians. He was echoing the language of Plato's *Republic* when Plato said that, in the ideal state, all our politicians would be philosophers and our philosophers politicians.

Scotland has certainly been blessed in the past by a great tradition of men who were both preachers of the gospel and scholars who sought to use their minds to understand the meaning and implications of grace and to be ready to give an answer to those who ask a reason for the faith that is in them. One thinks of the names of John Knox, Samuel Rutherford, Thomas Boston, Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine, Edward Irving, John McLeod Campbell, Thomas Erskine of Linlathen, James Denney and a host of others.

In all ages, issues have emerged which have tended to obscure the meaning of grace, but God has raised up men like the apostle Paul, Irenaeus, Athanasius, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, the Wesleys, George Whitfield, Kierkegaard, Karl Barth to call the Church back to her foundations in Christ. When one thinks of the Protestant Reformers, one thinks at once of their avowed concern to recover the gospel of grace, and who knows how many lives have been enriched by Luther's *Commentary on the Galatians*, Bunyan's *Pilgrims Progress* or Henry Scougal's *Life of God in the Soul of Man* which Susannah Wesley gave to her two young sons, and which Charles Wesley gave to George Whitfield when he came as a young enquirer to Oxford and which he tells us led to his conversion.

In our own day, within Protestantism, both liberal and evangelical, as well as in mediaeval Roman thought, there are attitudes and emphases and ways of preaching which can obscure the unconditional freeness of grace, undermine peace and assurance, and lead to sectarian divisions. **Sometimes even the very Churches which have taken their avowed stand on 'the doctrines of grace' are the very ones which then make their acceptance of others conditional upon their subscribing to their particular formulations of the meaning of grace, and have forgotten the New Testament injunction to love and accept and forgive others as freely and unconditionally as God in Christ has loved and accepted and forgiven us (Ro 15.7, Eph 4.32, Col 3.13ff, 1 Jn 4.19ff etc.).**

Why are some of the issues for which we should contend together if we are to comprehend with all saints something of the wonder of the love of Christ, that we might be filled with all the fullness of God--that we might enter more and more by faith into that

fullness which we already have in Christ? What is the nature of the love shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit?

Covenant or Contract?

One of the most significant words of the Bible is the word 'covenant'. We read about God making a covenant with Abraham, renewing that covenant at Sinai, about David making a covenant with Jonathan, and again with the elders at Hebron when he became king. Jeremiah speaks of a day when God will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and in the New Testament Jesus is presented to us as the mediator of the new covenant. 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood.'

On the one hand God binds himself to men like Abraham and David with solemn promises. On the other hand he binds Israel to himself under solemn obligations--proleptic of the day in which he will bind himself to mankind and mankind to himself in Jesus Christ in covenant love. Again we read about men like Joshua, Hezekiah, Josiah binding themselves and the nation in loyalty to God in covenant. A great deal of research has been done in recent years by scholars like Mendenhall, Hillers, McCarthy and others on Ancient Hittite suzerainty treaties, whose pattern bears a striking similarity to the covenants of old Israel.

Likewise in post-Reformation--especially Scottish--history, in the upheavals of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with the break-up of feudalism and the emergence of the late post renaissance doctrine of the divine right of kings and the resultant struggles for liberty, we read about men making 'bands,' 'pacts', 'covenants', 'contracts', 'political leagues' to defend their freedom, to preserve the rights of a people *vis a vis* his subjects.

For example, when Charles I sought to impose uniformity of worship on the Scottish church by the introduction of Laud's Liturgy, the response was the National Covenant signed in the Kirk of the Greyfriars in Edinburgh in 1638. Five years later came the Solemn League and Covenant in 1643, with the opening of the Westminster Assembly, as a parliamentary commission to achieve a 'covenanted uniformity in religion' ... 'in doctrine, worship and government' ... 'betwixt the Churches of Christ in the kingdoms of Scotland, England and Ireland'. The key word throughout was *foedus*--'covenant' (the word from which our word 'federal' comes)--a word which was rich in theological significance as well as a revolutionary symbol in a nation struggling for freedom.

It was precisely this period, the late 16th and 17th centuries, which marks the rise of the so-called 'federal theology' or covenant theology--the federal Calvinism which was to become the criterion of Protestant orthodoxy for the next 250 years. The Westminster Confession of Faith, with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, was the first Reformed confession to enshrine the scheme of federal theology, though in a mild way. But it was certain features of this which were to bring the protest, first of the so-called 'Marrowmen' (Thomas Boston, the Erskine brothers, etc.) in Scotland in the early eighteenth century, and the more vigorous protest of Edward Irving [1] and John

McLeod Campbell, Thomas Erskine of Linlathen in the nineteenth century, in their concern--in their different ways--to recover the universality of grace and the unconditional freeness of grace. Edward Irving's sermons on the Incarnation preached in London in the 1820s--that Jesus Christ, as creator and redeemer of mankind, was anointed by the Holy Spirit in our humanity to heal our fallen humanity, and that we might participate free and unconditionally in his anointing by the same Spirit--echoed the theology of the great Greek Fathers of the Church like Irenaeus, Athanasius and the Cappadocian divines, in the passionate conviction that 'the unassumed is the unredeemed' and that Jesus Christ is the head of the whole human race, and that in and through Christ, God our Father has given himself in love, by the Spirit of adoption to the world.

What were the features of 'federal theology' which led to the protest of these theologians and which led Irving to republish the older Scots Confession of 1560? Primarily it was the view that Jesus Christ is only the mediator for some men, the elect (the doctrine of limited atonement); that law is prior to grace, that God is related to all men by a law as contrasting sovereign and judge, but only to some in grace; the resulting loss of joy and assurance as men and women looked inward to see if they could see 'evidences' of election rather than outward to Jesus Christ the head of all things and the saviour of mankind. None of these men were universalists but they passionately believed in the universality and unconditional freeness of grace. They believed in the love of God, and they knew that there is no such thing as conditional love--though men might sin against the Holy Spirit and deny the Lord who bought them.

To understand the issue, it is fruitful to look at the meaning of the word 'covenant'. The background of seventeenth century 'federal Calvinism' was the emerging socio-political philosophy of 'social contract', 'contract of government', with its doctrine of the 'rights of man' based on 'natural laws', illumined by the light of reason and given divine sanction by revelation. This was the political philosophy of the many Puritans who left these shores to get away from the 'tyranny' of British kings and feudal overlords for the 'free world' where they would be free to worship God as they pleased, and with whom they pleased, with liberty of conscience, and where no one would 'tell them'. If on the one hand this was to prove so influential in the rise of modern democracy (and the so-called 'American way of life'), on the other hand it was to have a profound influence on the preaching of the gospel throughout the puritan world. Just as people today understand the language of trade unions, civil rights, protest marches, etc., so the people of the 17th century understood the language of bands, pacts, covenants, contracts, natural law, the rights of man and the rights of the people. To make a protest in the defence of liberty, people banded together, drew up a covenant, stated the conditions of their allegiance, and fixed their signatures. Here was a conceptual framework within which Reformed theology was to be recast as 'federal theology Calvinism', and her preachers found a language of communication, a kind of 'theology of politics' which could be readily grasped by the man in the street in a land struggling for freedom.

What then do we mean by the word 'covenant'--*foedus*? Clearly there are different meanings of this word, not only in law and politics, but also in the Bible, and a flood of light has been thrown on this by recent studies. Let me suggest *one* fundamental meaning. Theologically speaking, *a covenant is a promise binding two people or two parties to love one another unconditionally*. Think for example of the marriage service. During the Reformation, the word 'covenant' was used in the English Service Book of 1549 and has been retained in the Scottish marriage service. The bride and bridegroom 'promise and covenant' to love one another 'for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death you do part'. What does all that mean? In a word they promise to love one another *unconditionally*. To use a different illustration, let us suppose here are two people who have a quarrel, and things become so bad that they decide to call in the minister to help them effect a reconciliation. He listens to one side of the unhappy story and then to the other, and no doubt there are faults on both sides. But there comes the point when he says, 'Listen, you must forgive and forget!' But so often, back comes the reply, 'Well, I'll forgive him IF ...'. The moment the minister hears the big word 'IF' he knows the person is not going to forgive. **Forgiveness is love in action, and there is no such thing as conditional love.** Only when they are prepared to forgive one another unconditionally, and where there is mutual acceptance of forgiveness, can there be true reconciliation. If someone says 'I'll forgive you IF ...', **that person does not know the meaning of love.** There is no such thing as conditional love in God or in man, and that fact is enshrined in the theological concept of a 'covenant of love'.

It is precisely this which makes a covenant so different from a *contract*! *A contract, in common parlance, is a legal relationship in which two people or two parties bind themselves together on mutual conditions to effect some future result.* The business world and political world are full of such contracts. They take the form 'If you do this, then I will do that'. Society at large is built on a network of such contractual arrangements.

No doubt in Scots (and Roman) law, a covenant and a contract mean the same thing, though lawyers distinguish different kinds of contract--they are not always bi-lateral. Traditionally we have talked about the marriage contract. Samuel Rutherford in his Catechism could speak about the covenant of grace as 'a contract of marriage' between Christ and the believer, and then go on to speak of the conditions of the contract. The Latin word *foedus* perhaps obscured the difference, for it means both a covenant and a contract. But theologically it seems to me they must be carefully distinguished.

In the Bible there were many kinds of covenant. For example, there were (a) bilateral covenants, as in the classical example of David and Jonathan, covenants between equals. Marriage is a bilateral covenant. On the other hand, in the Bible, there were (b) *unilateral* covenants, as when in old Israel, at the time of his coronation, a king made a covenant *for* his people, rather in the manner of the suzerainty covenants of the Hittite kings. 'This is the kind of king I am going to be and this is the kind of people you are going to be', as when Solomon's son Rehoboam came to the throne. But the fact that it was a unilateral covenant did not eliminate the need for response on the part of the

people. Indeed the people either said 'Amen' to it, 'God save the king!', or 'to your tents, O Israel, we shall not have this man to reign over us!' In that instance, you remember, Rehoboam's high-handed measures split the kingdom in two. The ten northern tribes went off and made Jeroboam the son of Nebat king.

The important thing is that in the Bible, God's dealings with men in creation and in redemption--in grace--are those of a covenant and not of a contract. This was the heart of the Pauline theology of grace, expounded in *Romans* and *Galatians*, and this was the central affirmation of the Reformation. *The God of the Bible is a covenant-God and not a contract-God.* God's covenant dealings with men have their source in the loving heart of God, and the form of the covenant is the indicative statement, 'I will be your God and you shall be my people'. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the God who has made a covenant *for us* in Christ, binding himself to man and man to himself in Christ, and who summons us to respond in faith and love to what he has done so freely for us in Christ. Through the Holy Spirit, we are awakened to that love and lifted up out of ourselves to participate in the (incarnate) Son's communion with the Father.

Two things are therefore together in a biblical understanding of grace, the covenant of love made for man in Christ, between the Father and the incarnate Son. (a) On the one hand, it is *unconditioned* by any considerations of worth or merit or prior claim. God's grace is 'free grace'. (b) On the other hand, it is *unconditional* in the costly claims it makes upon us. God's grace is 'costly grace'. **It summons us unconditionally to a life of holy love--of love for God and love for all men. The one mistake is so to stress free grace that we turn it into 'cheap grace' by taking grace for granted--the danger of the 'antinomianism' against which Wesley protested. The other mistake is so to stress the costly claims of grace that we turn grace into conditional grace, in a legalism which loses the meaning of grace.**

The fallacy of *legalism* in all ages--perhaps this is the tendency of the human heart in all ages--is to *turn God's covenant of grace into a contract*--to say God will only love you and forgive you or give you the gift of the Holy Spirit IF ... you fulfill prior conditions. But this is to invert 'the comely order of grace' as the old Scottish divines put it. **In the Bible, the form of the covenant is such that the indicatives of grace are prior to the obligations of law and human obedience.** 'I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, I have loved you and redeemed you and brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, *therefore* keep my commandments.' But legalism puts it the other way round. 'If you keep the law, God will love you!' **The imperatives are made prior to the indicatives. The covenant has been turned into a contract, and God's grace--or the gift of the Spirit--made conditional on man's obedience.**

Grace prior to law or law prior to grace?

It was precisely against this inversion of the order of grace that Paul protested in Galatians chapter 3. You remember his argument. God gave his promises to Abraham, and only 430 years later came the **law at Sinai**, not to annul the promise, not to impose

conditions of grace, but **to spell out the obligations of grace**, to be the **schoolmaster to lead us to Christ**. Against the Judaizers, Paul is arguing that in authentic Judaism, grace is prior to law. As Martin Buber argued so powerfully in his book on *Moses*, the Book of the Covenant in *Exodus* is a covenant, not a contract. Judaism is NOT synonymous with legalism, whatever may have happened at times within Judaism.

To put it in other words, love, like marriage love, always brings its obligations--its unconditional obligations--but the obligations of love are not conditions of love. To turn a covenant into a contract is to turn categorical imperatives into hypothetical imperatives (to use Kantian language), and hence to weaken the imperatives. **Legalism always weakens the character of love**. 'Do I weaken the law' says the Apostles--by seeing it in the context of grace? 'No, I strengthen it!' (Ro 3.31). This question of the relation of law to grace is of paramount importance, because much evangelical preaching can go wrong at this point. It is possible to do two things which can lead to a misunderstanding of Paul. (a) **The first is to take the text, 'the law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ' (Ga 3.24), out of its context in the chapter and build a theology, or a complete preaching technique on it. Then our pattern becomes: man--law--sin--repentance--grace. This is what theologians call the Western *ordo salutis*, which grew up in the Latin Middle Ages, and was too often absorbed in later Puritan and Calvinist preaching. It not only inverts the biblical order but led to a form of 'legal preaching' (as the older Scots divines called it) and to regarding repentance as a condition of grace. Paul's exposition in *Galatians* and *Romans* makes it abundantly plain that this order was a different one: promise--law--fulfilment for us in Christ--therefore faith and repentance. For Paul faith and repentance are not conditions of grace but our response to Christ.** (b) **A second mistake is to generalise from Luther's very wonderful conversion experience and then read it back into Paul's own experience or make it a paradigm for all authentic conversion experiences, as though there must first be a deep sense of sin, and a struggling for justification by the law and good works, before there can be the experience of grace. This is to read back into Paul what has been called by K Stendahl 'the introspective conscience of the West'. Sometimes it is the discovery of grace--of the love of Christ and the meaning of Calvary--which first discovers to us our sin and our condemnation under the law. When John Calvin wrote the first edition of his *Institutes* in 1536, he followed the order of law--grace, the order of Luther's Catechism. But in all subsequent editions he abandoned it, and argued very powerfully for the opposite as in Book Two of the 1559 definitive edition. In spite of this however, later scholastic Calvinism, by its distinction between a covenant of works (law) and a covenant of grace--a distinction unknown to Calvin, but which first grew up among the Puritans in England after 1583 and became foundational in federal Calvinism in Scotland--reverted to the order of law--grace, reading it right back into the doctrine of God, and interpreting creation and redemption in terms of this order. So Jonathan Edwards in New England taught that justice is the essential attribute of God, by which he is related to all men as law giver, but his love is arbitrary, by which he is related to the elect alone in grace.**

It was against this inversion of **'the comely order of grace'** that McLeod Campbell maintained that in the Bible, **'the filial is prior to the judicial'**, and Edward Irving preached

his sermons on the Incarnation. God is love in his innermost being, as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and it is this triune God who is active in creation and redemption and who gives us the law to lead us to Christ, that we might receive the adoption of sons. Jesus Christ as the head of the race has received from the Father the gifts of the Spirit in our humanity, that out of his own fullness he might give the Spirit to us to fulfil in us the filial purpose of creation. 'That Man' McLeod Campbell used to tell his congregation, 'has the Holy Spirit for you.'

Evangelical repentance or legal repentance?

Few distinctions in theology are more important than Calvin's distinction (*Institutes* Bk. 3 ch. 3) between 'legal repentance' and 'evangelical repentance', drawn in his critique of the mediaeval sacrament of penance. 'Legal repentance' says, 'Repent! and IF you repent, you will be forgiven!' It makes love and grace and forgiveness conditional upon our repentance, our 'conversion'. So the mediaeval world said that if the sinner is truly contrite, if he confesses his sins and makes amends (*contritio, confessio, satisfactio*) then he may be forgiven and receive absolution. This was the root of the mediaeval doctrine of merit. Calvin argued that this inverted the evangelical order of grace, and made repentance prior to forgiveness, whereas **in the New Testament forgiveness is logically prior to repentance (conversion). Repentance is our response to the word of the Cross which through the Spirit converts and heals and reconciles. The Christ who died for us and rose again for us to wipe out our sins and present us in himself as righteous to the Father, through the eternal Spirit, now unites us with himself through the Spirit in a life of daily *mortificatio* and *vivificatio* of dying and rising with Christ (Ro 6). Repentance is the work of the Spirit in bringing home to us the meaning of Calvary--a response to grace, not a condition of grace.** Nothing is more needed today than a recovery of a proper theology of conversion (both individual and social) which enshrines this Reformation insight. Much contemporary evangelism and many calls for social action are what our forefathers would have called 'legal preaching'. But the law never converts. The Holy Spirit is given to us in Christ, not through the law. We think again of Paul's words in Galatians chapter 3. **'Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law (by fulfilling conditions) or by the hearing of faith?'** The clear answer is that they received the Spirit by faith alone--by faith in Christ and him crucified. The same argument is elaborated in his First Epistle to the Corinthians (chapters one and two) to a Church divided on the subject of the gifts of the Spirit. When Paul preached Christ and the Cross, then the Spirit came in power, and made them one body, freely giving them all their gifts, nourishing them at the one Lord's table. 'Legal repentance' is not only the fallacy of the mediaeval sacrament of penance, but also of much Protestantism, both liberal and evangelical. It obscures the gospel of grace. It is a failure to understand the meaning of the Cross and, as in Paul's day, it is divisive.

Descriptive and prescriptive 'ifs'

Calvin found that he had to defend the doctrine of evangelical repentance against the anabaptist left as well as the Roman right. Doesn't the New Testament say, 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins', and 'If thou shalt confess

with thy mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in thine heart that God has raised him from the dead thou shalt be saved'? Does this not imply that faith and confession and repentance are conditions of grace? By a careful and thorough examination of all relevant passages, Calvin showed that this interpretation is due to shallow and faulty exegesis. It is beyond our scope here to follow his conclusive arguments. What are we to make of this 'if' language?

In the Old Covenant and in the New Covenant, there is a clear pattern:-- (1) *grace*, covenant, election of Israel, the New Covenant; (2) *unconditional obligations*, eg the ten commandments, repent! believe! obey! etc. (3) *consequences* of obedience and disobedience, the promises and warnings, blessings and curses of Gerizim and Ebal, which follow IF Israel keeps covenant, IF we repent and believe. That is, the 'if' language belongs to column (3) not to column (2). They are 'descriptive IFs', ways of describing the consequences of fidelity and infidelity not 'prescriptive IFs'--not prescriptions for grace. So in the New Testament, it is because (1) Christ died to take away our sins on the Cross and seal the New Covenant with his blood, that we are summoned, (2) *unconditionally* to repent and believe and be baptized (Ac 2) and that therefore (3) we are given wonderful promises that 'If we confess our sins ...' etc. we shall find the joys of forgiveness, peace, assurance, fellowship in the Spirit, life in Christ, as a wonderful consequence.

Indeed, this threefold pattern is the grammar of *all* loving relationships, between husband and wife, father and son, brother and sister. My covenant of love with my wife, lays me under unconditional obligations to be faithful, loyal, not to commit adultery. But I can go on to say that 'If I am faithful, I shall grow more and more into the joys of a happy marriage'. Because my marriage is basically a covenant and not just a contract, the 'ifs' are descriptions of the consequences of our love, not prescriptions for love. I do not say to my wife, 'If you are faithful, I will love you!'

There are also of course prescriptive 'IFs' in the Bible. But they come, for example, in the context of case law in the civil code of Exodus 20.22-23.33. Because we live in a world where people do transgress God's unconditional commandments, and do commit murder and adultery, then the civil law has to prescribe penalties, 'IF murder, then ...', 'IF adultery, then ...', 'IF injury, then ... eye for eye.' **It was the mistake of the Pharisees to read these prescriptive IFs back into the heart of the Torah--to confuse apodictic law with casuistic law.** But when they brought certain cases to Jesus, (eg the woman taken in adultery), **Jesus showed that the real inner prescription of the law was to love and forgive unconditionally! Love is the fulfilling of the law, and there is no such thing as conditional love in God or in man.**

God's love, so understood, should find focal expression at the Lord's table, for such love is creative of community, for there Christ gathers his people and gives himself to them freely and unconditionally by the Spirit and lifts us up out of ourselves and our introspectiveness and social lethargy, and frees us to love him and to love all men in his name--where he converts us into being a loving, caring, believing community, members of his missionary body in the world.

In the language of the older Scottish divines, sacraments are signs and seals of the covenant of grace--converting ordinances, not badges of our conversion. We are called by the word of the Cross daily to evangelical repentance through life in the Spirit, and we receive the Spirit by faith alone.

Note

[1] See the article on Irving and McLeod Campbell by Gordon Strachan, 'Theological and Cultural Origins of the Nineteenth Century Pentecostal Movement', in *Theological Renewal*, No 1, Oct/Nov 1975.