

Some Sad and Serious Misconceptions

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Introduction

We received literally hundreds of oral and written commendations and encouragements during the first year of *The Gospel Journal's* existence. Lest I leave the wrong impression, I hasten to say that not every reaction has been positive. However, fewer than ten of those who have taken the trouble to register a response have been negative or critical of *TGJ*. The mention of these few unhappy responders brings me to the subject of this "Editorial Perspective."

One of the earliest such responses came from an unhappy brother who had paid in advance for a two-year subscription, but who wrote to our business office requesting cancellation. Our business manager, Kenneth Ratcliff, inquired of him the reasons. The brother responded forthrightly, which I appreciate. However, his response reveals some woeful misconceptions concerning some crucial subjects. It also reveals anything but the "irenic" attitude of which most liberals boast.

His views merely echo some of the things the change agents on the radical periphery have been saying for several years now. It is all too evident that many thousands of brethren have imbibed these erroneous concepts and are marching right out of the church of the Lord because of them. Such folk have gained the ascendancy in hundreds of congregations, which are likely beyond recovery for the Truth. Because this critic's objections to our emphasis in *TGJ* are representative of the wrong-headedness of so many, I believe they are worthy of a response. This man said "reading *TGJ* only served to anger me." Now what provoked this erring brother to such anger? I will let him answer.

Promoting "the Doctrine of the Church of Christ"

He states: "It appears as though you chose to stress the importance of the Church of Christ and its doctrines/dogmas over 'Christ and Him crucified.'" Similarly, he wrote, "I just got the impression that the thrust of your magazine was to promote the doctrine of the Church of Christ over Christ Himself." Where has this brother been, and what book has he been studying (when he should have been studying the Bible)? There is no such thing as "the doctrine of the church of Christ" in the sense of which he speaks (i.e., "Methodist doctrine" or "Baptist doctrine"). To speak of "Church of Christ doctrine" is to denominationalize the body of

Christ. The very expression conveys a denominational concept of the church, which, we infer from his statements, is the misconception this brother holds.

The Lord's church has no doctrine that emanates from it as if the church originated it. This, in fact, is the Roman Catholic claim. "The church," they say, "gave you the Bible." (I have always wondered, if this is so, why does Roman Catholicism refuse to follow the very book it claims to have created?) Of course, they have it just backwards. The Word, which God produced (2 Tim. 3:16-17), is the seed of the kingdom (Luke 8:11), and it produces the church (but most certainly not the Roman Catholic Church!) when men and women obey it. The church is then to support the Gospel Truth, which God revealed, both in proclaiming and defending it (1 Tim. 3:15).

The church of our Lord may be said to have its own doctrine in only one sense of which I am aware – the church has a body of doctrine (teaching) that is peculiar to it and inseparable from it. However – I will state it again – it is not a body or a book of doctrine that the church wrote and published. It is actually just the teaching/ doctrine of the New Testament. If this brother accuses us of promoting the doctrine of a denomination called the "Church of Christ" (as he apparently envisions the church), he is utterly mistaken.

The truth of the matter is that one cannot teach New Testament doctrine without teaching about the church revealed within its pages – the church of Christ. This brother, along with many others, believes that if we deliver the Truth concerning the church we are somehow ignoring or neglecting the Christ. Nothing could be more untrue. Preaching the church as the New Testament reveals it is inseparable from preaching the Christ. Paul preached nothing in Corinth but "Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2), but guess what resulted from it? "The church of God which is at Corinth" (1:2)! Was not "Jesus Christ and Him crucified" the theme of the Pentecost message (Acts. 2:22-36)? That very message produced the first church of Christ in history (vv. 38-47).

To preach this same message today will no more result in a denomination (call it "Baptist," "Presbyterian," or "Church of Christ" [yes, there are some denominations that masquerade under this Scriptural designation]) than it did in the first century. Only the simple, undenominational church of Christ will result from preaching Christ faithfully. Furthermore, Christ cannot be preached faithfully without preaching the church (Acts 8:12). All who try to separate the Head from His body commit the horrible crime of spiritual decapitation and will surely receive an eternal death sentence! Our complaining brother, whether intentionally or not,

is advocating a churchless Christ, which is just as impotent and unscriptural as a Christless church!

Promoting Man's Part in Salvation

Our critic was incensed by one statement in our "Plan of Salvation" teaching ad: "God has done His part. Have you done yours?" He then rails: "How dare you gentlemen even suggest that what we do is remotely near the same level as what Christ did for us at Calvary." How does this brother find such an equation in the simple statement and question about salvation? Of course, what God has done through Christ for us can never be equaled by us in return. However, this fact by no means implies that there is therefore nothing that man needs to do.

Would this brother affirm that God does not deserve or expect any response from us to His grace and mercy? Since he does not like our question, "Have you done yours [i.e., your part]?" does this brother think men have nothing to do in order to be saved? Is this man a disciple of John Calvin, who invented the doctrine that men not only **need** not respond to God's grace and Gospel, but that they **cannot** do so (because of their alleged total depravity) without a direct intervention of the Holy Spirit? Or, is he a disciple of the semi-Calvinist, Rubel Shelly, who (just as erroneously as Calvin) has pontificated: "It is a scandalous and outrageous lie to teach that salvation arises from human activity. We do not contribute one whit to our salvation."

Of course, it would be wrong to say that we can save ourselves by our own activities or good works apart from Jesus' atoning sacrifice. I have never thought or taught such, and no faithful brother or sister has. Such is a Shelly straw man. However, it is blatantly wrong even to imply, much less state, that we contribute absolutely nothing to our own salvation. The people on Pentecost cried, "What shall we **do**?" (Acts 2:37). Poor Peter! After all, he was only an inspired apostle, so what did he know? He knew no better than to tell the Pentecostians to **do their part**—repent and be baptized by the authority of Christ unto the remission of their sins in order to save themselves (vv. 38–40). About three thousand of them had no better sense than to **do** that very thing immediately (v. 41) (which, incidentally, resulted in the establishment of the church [v. 47]). This brother apparently thinks that our insistence on some human responsibility in being saved somehow infringes on the grace of God. Read on.

Promoting *No-Grace Doctrine*

Finally, the objector gets to what may be his real irritant in *TGJ*: “Is the word *grace* even referenced in your magazine one time?!?!?” Here we have another declamation on the well-worn “you-don’t-ever-talk-about-grace” tirade, a certifiable trademark of every liberal. All such comments reveal at least two glaring errors concerning grace.

First, just as their view of the church is denominational, so is their concept of grace. Many in the 3-Ps category (preachers, professors, and publishers), themselves having only one toe still in the church, have openly taken up the “grace-only” chant in recent years. (Obviously, this soul-fatal virus has infected the complainer against *TGJ*.) To them, if one mentions the church of Christ or such commands as repentance, confession, and baptism in connection with redemption (I suppose they would still allow faith!), one does not believe in God’s “grace.” They can hardly conceive that grace could include any law or obedience thereto.

However, the Scriptures teach the exact opposite. To offer salvation to sinners **apart from** the Lord’s church and bereft of repentance, confession, and baptism is to **deprive** them of God’s grace. The Holy Spirit has revealed no other means of gaining access to saving grace (Mark 16:15–16; John 3:5; Acts 2:38, 41, 47; 22:16; Tit. 2:11; 3:5; 1 Pet. 3:21; et al.).

This brother, as quoted above, seems to believe that man should not have to do anything toward his own salvation. Salvation is indeed free in the sense that we cannot earn it or purchase it (Rom. 6:23; Tit. 3:5). However, in both of the passages just cited, Paul makes it plain in the context that submission to baptism (which brings “newness of life” and which is the “washing of regeneration”) is part of God’s plan of grace that brings salvation (Tit. 2:11). The Bible no more teaches that we can be saved by grace alone than it teaches that we can be saved by baptism alone. Saved by grace? — absolutely (Eph. 2:8–9; Tit. 2:11), but **not by grace alone**. Saved by baptism? — again, absolutely (Mark 16:15–16; 1 Pet. 3:21), but **not by baptism alone**.

Second, one does not necessarily have to use the word *grace* to emphasize God’s great favors and blessings upon humankind. Paul did not write to the Corinthians that he “determined not to know anything among you, save grace.” Rather, his steadfast message was “Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). Who will be so obtuse as to accuse him of never referencing “grace” one time in his preaching? Will these critics now be consistent and rail against the Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:14–36), Peter’s sermon at the Beautiful Gate (3:11–26), Stephen’s sermon (7:2–53), Philip’s preaching in Samaria and to the Ethiopian (8:5, 12, 35),

Peter's sermon in Caesarea (10:34–48), and Paul's sermon in Antioch (13:16–41)? The word *grace* does not appear in one of them!

Do these change agents have such a fixation on a single word that they no longer care about or understand what God's marvelous grace embraces? Every time the inspired men preached about Jesus, the kingdom, redemption through the blood of the cross, the plan of salvation, how to live daily, what constitutes acceptable worship, or Heaven (and a host of other subjects), **they were preaching on grace!** Likewise, when we write or preach on these and other Biblical subjects, let all the houses of liberals therefore know assuredly, that we are writing and preaching grace, let them cavil all they will.

Conclusion

If truth were told, denominationalists and their first cousins (liberal brethren) do not know the meaning of Biblical grace. To them it is little more than a free, unconditional ride to the Gloryland. If ever there was a prostitution of a Scriptural doctrine, this is it. And, how could there be a more crucial, salvation-jeopardizing doctrine than that of perverted grace?

Faithful brethren have never ceased to preach grace—real grace as the Bible defines it. In answer to our carping brother's question, "Have we referenced the word *grace* even one time" in our pages, we state a resounding, "Yes, on practically every page in every issue"! God being our helper, we shall continue to do so, just as the Bible teaches on the subject—not as men have perverted it.

[**Note:** I wrote this MS for and it was published in a slightly different form as an "Editorial Perspective" in *THE GOSPEL JOURNAL*, January 2001, of which I was editor at the time.]

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