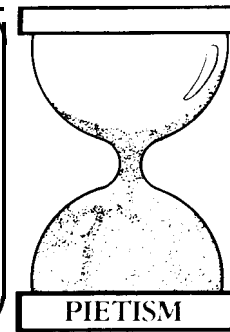


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



VI
Vol. VII, No. 10

©Kenneth L. Gentry

October, 1993

POWERFUL SIN OR POWERFUL GRACE?

The Point at Issue

by Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., Th. D.

This concludes a four-part series on the Lordship Controversy between dispensationalists and Calvinists. I once again turn to an objection by non-Lordship advocate J. Kevin Butcher.

Butcher accuses John MacArthur (and through him all Lordship advocates) of having "a shallow view of the power of sin."¹ This is due to the theology of Lordship Advocacy which holds that the true believer will *tend* to live righteously and that there will *necessarily* be growth in grace – though we never reach perfection this side of death.

Certainly no Calvinist can be charged with having a "shallow view of the power of sin." We hold to the doctrine of *tots/depravity*, which teaches that man is sinful in the totality of his being, in his heart, soul, mind, and strength. But I am convinced that non-Lordship advocacy has a *shallow conception of grace*. Surely the Resurrection of Christ is more powerful than the Fall of Adam. Christ's Resurrection overcomes the effects of Adam's Fall, and not vice versa!

In a radio debate I had in 1990 with Rev. Butcher, he set up a scenario to ensnare me in my theology. His scenario went something like this: "Suppose there was a six year old girl, who had non-Christian parents. This girl spent one night with a Christian friend. While with that Christian friend, she attended church where the gospel was preached. Upon hearing the gospel she became a true believer. And suppose she returned home to her non-Christian family, who became incensed at her new-found faith. The non-Christian family moved away with the little girl, where she never again had contact with Christianity. Question: Would she grow in grace, as per Lordship Advocacy?"

There is an easy response to that question: Yes. If she is truly born-again, she will grow in grace." That is, she will have a bent toward righteousness, even despite a lack of training in the Word.

Our Spiritual Blessings

According to the Scriptures, the Christian is one who has "all spiritual blessings in heavenly places." Ephesians 1:3 promises: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ." Peter confirms this: "According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue" (2 Pet. 1:3).

The spiritual situation of the true Christian is that he has "spiritual blessings" and that God has given us "all things that pertain unto life and godliness." In salvation, our orientation to sin is replaced with a bent toward righteousness. This is as

true for the six year old girl in the question above, as it was for the Ephesian Christians in Paul's day.

We Are Under Grace

It may seem surprising for me to say this, but most assuredly the Christian is "not under law, but under grace." Remans 6:14 clearly promises the believer that "sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace." This does not mean that we live under a new era of grace, whereas our Jewish forefathers lived under an era of law (for then, upon this construction of Paul's statement, they would not have been capable of living righteously according to Paul's Remans 6 argument!).

What Paul is teaching is that once we are saved, we are not under any *principle of law* or *rule of obligation* in order to *merit salvation*. Outside of Christ, men tend to think of salvation as being at least partially due to their own merit. They are laboring under a law principle in their own estimation.

But we must notice that Paul says very clearly: "sin shall not have dominion over you." The true Christian has the promise that sin's dominion has been broken. There is no reason why Christians should live under the dominion of sin. This is as true for the six year old girl in the illustration, as it was for the Roman Christians in Paul's day.

The Indwelling of the Spirit

At the very moment of salvation, the newborn Christian is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. There is a new agency, a new power within that enables one to live against sinful temptations.

Romans 8:9: "But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his." 7 *Corinthians* 3:16: "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?" 1 *Corinthians* 6:19: "What? Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?" 2 *Corinthians* 6:16: "And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

This indwelling of the Spirit does not come later with study and effort. He comes at the moment of salvation. And this indwelling of the Holy Spirit is as true for the six year girl above, as it was for the true Christians at Corinth.

The Indwelling Christ

Not only may it be said that we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God, but also by Christ Himself, through the Holy Spirit. Christ lives in us, as we live "in Him." Our growth in grace is not self-generated, but Christ-generated because of this glorious truth.

Remans 8:10: "And if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin; but the Spirit is life because of righteousness." *Galatians 2:20*: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me."

This glorious truth of the indwelling Christ is as true for the six year old girl, as it was for the true Christians at Galatia.

Resurrection Life

Because of the infusion of the Spirit of life in our hearts, we are made alive in Christ. We are made partakers of the resurrected life at the very moment of salvation.

John 5:21: "For as the Father raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth them; even so the Son quickeneth whom he will." *John 5:24*: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, bath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life." *Remans 6:4*: "Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." *Remans 6:8-9*: "Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him: Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death bath no more dominion over him." *Colossians 2:13*: "And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, bath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses."

This is just as true for the six year old girl, as it was for the Colossian Christians in Paul's day.

The Intercession of Christ

In addition, the believer is under the constant, loving oversight and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is constantly interceded for by Christ at the right hand of God.

Remans 8:34: "Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us." *Hebrews 7:25*: "Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them." *1 John 5:18*: "We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not."

This is as true for the six year old girl, as it was for John's readers in the first century.

The New Heart

Furthermore, the convert has a new heart, or character, given him (or her). Saving grace is an intrusion into the soul and a transformation of the character.

Ezekiel 11:19: "And I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out

of their flesh, and will give them an heart of flesh." *Ezekiel 36:26*: "A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh." (Hal Lindsey probably applies these to "last days" heart transplants in hospitals, but I do not follow that interpretive twist.)

This is as true for the six year old girl, as it was true in prophecy for those who were to be saved in Messiah's reign in history. We have a new heart that orients us toward the things of God.

The Christian is a New Man

Salvation is spoken of as creating a "new man," so radical is the change. The creative power of God intervenes to transform a vile sinner into a new man, a regenerate vessel of mercy.

Ephesians 4:22-24: "That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness." *Colossians 3:9-10*: "Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him."

This is as true for the six year old girl, as it was for the true Christians in Colassae in Paul's day.

The New Creation

The change within is so significant that it actually partakes of the new creation in anticipation. We are "new creatures" under the creative and redemptive work of God.

2 Corinthians 5:17: "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." *Galatians 6:15*: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature." *Ephesians 2:10*: "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God bath before ordained that we should walk in them."

This is as true for the six year old girl, as it was for the true Christians at Ephesus.

Conclusion

The theoretical question is: "Will the six year old convert in the hostile environment grow in grace?"

To this inquirer, we ask in response: Is the girl the recipient of "all spiritual blessings in Christ"? Is she now under grace rather than law, so that sin does not have dominion over her? Does she have the Holy Spirit dwelling in her? Does she have Christ dwelling in her? Has she been resurrected from spiritual death to newness of life? Does Christ intercede for her? Has she been given a new heart by God's sovereign grace? Is she a "new man" in Christ? Is she a "new creation"? If the answer to these is, "Yes," then I think the Lordship position is secured: Surely she will grow in grace.

Surely God's grace is more powerful than sin itself.

¹ J. Kevin Butcher, "A Critique of the Gospel According to Jesus," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 2:1 (Spring, 1989), 36.