



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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Grace Theology From Scratch

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A FORWARD

This is an edited version of my response to the request from a Directed Prayer Retreat participant for a statement of Grace Theology from Scratch. Hence I have retained the form of addressing myself to the small group of eight who attended that Retreat – and, in that way, addressing you the reader.

Grace Theology from scratch?

When you say "scratch", I don't know just where to start because there already is a believed theology that each of us has. Insofar as I can tell, the general belief is in a theology of law or works. It says basically that I am depraved, I am a sinner. In general I, as a sinner, want all these bad kinds of things, and until I get right with God I believe I am lost. I get right with God by saying the right things, doing the right things, and believing the right things. Of course, that kind of theology is extremely conditional. It sets up the conditions that you are to meet in order to have the favor of God, and if you don't meet these conditions, then you have the disfavor of God. So it's a works theology. The presentation of that theology starts in the third chapter of Genesis, and it continues in the believing of people all the way through the Bible. Indeed it continues to this day. In fact, it seems, indeed, to be the prevalent way of believing.

If I start dealing with the issue of Grace Theology from scratch, then I need to go back to the first, second, and third chapters of Genesis, and see what is said there about who God is, who people are, and what people did about who they are. In an encapsulation, the first two chapters of Genesis are primarily concerned with saying who God is, and they structure what Grace Theology is all about. They say (I won't go into detail) God – a word that in the Hebrew means the one who is – creates all things. Special distinction is given to human beings who are created in the image of God. The first chapter ends with the statement that God sees everything that he has made and behold it is very good. To me, this is a clear statement that God sees his creation in his own image as very good along with all the rest that He has made, and does not see them as depraved.

The second chapter also tells a story of the creation of human beings. The words are, "God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living soul," which, in reality, is the same statement as, "God created human beings in his own image." The words for breathe, and breath, and living soul also mean spirit. They mean, in a very real sense, the being of God. God infused his spirit into the creation, and it became a living being. So the two passages seem to be saying the same thing.

By implication God does more in the second chapter. God values the creation in his own image enough to have created them as decision makers which is a very significant thing. It is perhaps, the most accurate way to describe being in the image of God. The Creator is decision maker, and the created in the Creator's image is decision maker.

Sort of as an aside, the creation in the image of the Creator does not have the option of not deciding. God created decision-making creatures. It is necessary that decisions be made. There is no alternative. The genius of that, apart from the decision making, is that if one is not a decision maker, one really doesn't have any life. One is an automaton. One is a puppet. One is a nothing. In that sense, there is no spirit.

Another way in which the creation is like the Creator is in carrying the responsibility that goes with deciding. When I, the creature, decide, I am responsible for the implementation of that decision and its outcome. I am, as it were, a co-laborer, a co-sharer with God, both in decision making and in carrying the responsibility for the decision. I don't have an option not to be.

When I decide to eat the fruit – when I decide to eat whatever it is I decide to eat – then there happens to me whatever happens to me for having eaten it. Good or bad, right or wrong, pro or con – whatever – the outcome follows upon the decision and the action that goes with the decision.

That concept is quite significant in developing an understanding of Grace Theology, and in confronting the whole issue of man's relationship to God. When God cares about – values – his creation in his own image enough to have supplied that creation with all the instructions, all the information, all the resources needed to make the decisions wisely that human beings are confronted with making, the basic and ultimate decision is about relationship to the Creator.

As you know, the story in Genesis 2 tells of the creation of human beings in the Spirit of God, and of the creation of the garden of Eden. It tells of people dwelling in the garden with their tasks to perform and their lives to be lived. They are instructed that they have the freedom to eat of all the fruit of the garden except of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Note the significance of the restraint. In the Hebrew, as I understand it, the phrase "the knowledge of good and evil" is a way of saying "the knowledge of all things". The distinction here is not that human beings can choose and can do things that then give them the knowledge of all things. It is that, in the image of God, they already have access to that knowledge. The issue then becomes whether they are going to turn to that knowledge as their resource for living their lives and for taking care of themselves, instead of turning to God, or are going to stay in the relationship with their Creator.

The later decision – to stay in relationship with their Creator – is the "tough love" relationship exemplified concisely and beautifully by the words at the end of the second chapter, "and the man and his wife were both without any protection". (The word in the translation that I usually use is "naked" – "they were both naked".) "The man and his wife were both without any protection, and were neither ashamed nor afraid." (Genesis 2:25) That verse describes a trust-love relationship where those involved in it value themselves and each other so highly that there is no fear of negatives from each other, nor of being put down, nor rejected, nor not accepted, nor not loved. It is a picture of ideal

relationship whether it be between human being and human being or between human being and God. The creation story says to me that God created human beings to be in that kind of relationship with God and with each other.

However, for the relationship to have any real meaning for them, human beings carry the responsibility for knowing, believing, and accepting that they are loved and loving. In order to be in the trust-love relationship, it is necessary for them to decide to be in it. The alternative is to decide not to be in it, which, in the words of the story, was to put their trust in their knowledge of all things to provide for themselves, to be safe, and to have a full life.

In the story, the woman looked at the fruit of the tree and saw that it was good for food, that it was pleasing to the eye, that it was desirable to make one wise. Interestingly enough, the man and the woman already had all the food they wanted. They already had all the aesthetics that they could handle in the beauty of the garden. They already had access to the wisdom of God, the source of all being. They saw themselves confronted with the decision to figure out how to gain what, in fact, they already had – the whole, fulfilled life in a love-trust or trust-love relationship.

But in the story the man and the woman decided to seek the trust-love relationship rather than to accept that they already had it. They decided to depend upon their wisdom, their knowledge of all things, to enable them to find and have what they already had, but didn't allow themselves to recognize that they had. So, they made the decision, and ate of the fruit.

As the tempter had said, the outcome of the decision was that their eyes were opened. However, they were surprised at what they saw. They saw that "they were naked." They saw that they didn't have any protection. For the first time, they became aware of being vulnerable. Before they made this decision, they were just as vulnerable, just as unprotected, but they were not afraid. They didn't have any problems about it because they were in a trust-love relationship and the love was unconditional.

Preserving the trust-love relationship was not dependent upon anything that they did. It was not a reward to them. It was not something that came to them because they functioned properly, or in a prescribed way. It was gift of God, and that's what the word "grace" means. It was gift of creator to created both to be loved that way and to love. With the gift was the invitation to live out their lives as ones thusly loved – to live out their lives in a trust-love relationship.

But their eyes were opened to awareness that they were vulnerable when they chose to believe that they did not have a trust-love relationship, and acted on that belief. They realized they were like God knowing good and evil. They didn't see the value of a trust-love relationship until they abandoned it. Then they saw that they had to protect themselves from their vulnerability. They had chosen to take on the responsibility of protecting themselves. They believed a theology of works – not Grace. If they were to be able to enjoy their God-likeness, they had first to assure their survival.

The decision to take responsibility for assuring survival and obtaining the good life was made on the basis that they had to do something – to gain something – to find something – to get it, although the reality of the creation was that they already had it. By the gift – the grace – of God, it was already theirs. When they chose the route of works, they discovered fear, distrust, anxiety, and conditional loving.

The predominant drive then became, not to find their fulfillment, but to protect themselves against all possible threats. This they proceeded to do, in that stylized story, in three ways.

1. They tried to protect themselves by making aprons of fig leaves. The significance of that, so far as I'm concerned, is that they knew, if they did not preserve their capacity to reproduce, they were really dead. It was all over. They could not survive. And the best they could come up with was aprons of fig leaves – not much protection against the possibility of losing the power to reproduce.

2. Then the second thing they did to try to protect themselves was to try to hide. Instead of being in the trust-love relationship with God, they tried to hide from God. And God said, "What is going on here? Where are you?" And Adam said, I was afraid, because I didn't have any protection, and I hid myself." And God said, "Who told you that you didn't have any protection? How did you know?"

3. And Adam, bless his heart, did the thing that human beings have done ever since to try to protect themselves. He blamed somebody else. The common understanding seems to be that he blamed his wife. But he really blamed God. His words were, "The woman you gave me, gave me the fruit and I ate. It's your fault, God." And that very effectively broke the relationship with God as the man and woman saw it.

However, the story underscores the Grace of God again. Toward the end of the story, the words are, "God made garments of skins for them." Skins were considerably more protective than fig leaves. God stayed in the relationship.

And then the story tells that the consequence of their decision was that they were barred from the tree of life, but not the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They had to leave the garden, which is typically presented as God's punishment on them. I don't believe that to be the meaning of the story. I believe that God was taking care of them again. I believe they experienced God's consistent love, and God's willingness for them to experience the result of their own deciding.

Suppose God had not been consistent in His love and had been humoring and indulgent. Suppose He had said, "That's all right, children. You can have fullness of life anyway. Your deciding doesn't make any difference. You don't have responsibility. There aren't any consequences. I will go ahead and take care of you, and set aside your deciding and your responsibility."

There isn't much love in that way of functioning. There isn't even much love between human beings who do it that way.

So, from that point in scripture all the way through the Bible, the consistent message is that the creator creates in his own image, loves his creation in his own image unconditionally, manifests that love by the consistency of his loving attitudes and deeds and by giving instructions so that the loved ones have full resources available to them for living the life they are created to live – the life of trust – love relationship. This is Grace Theology concisely and briefly stated.

What Works Theology or Law Theology says consistently is that human beings are continually making the decision to try to seek or to gain what they already have – fulfillment in the trust – love relationship with God. Those who believe Works Theology speak of "salvation", "wholeness", "eternity", "fullness", "completeness", without realizing they are already ours by the grace of God.

If I believe the grace of God – if I believe the love of God – then I know in faith that I am whole, that I am fulfilled, that I am loved, and I live my life to express the reality of it.

By and large, the story of the Old Testament is of people who didn't believe that wholeness was God's gift to them. They kept looking for their salvation, or their fulfillment, from the point of view of Law. They saw God trying to fix it so they could be fulfilled if they did the right things. They interpreted God's action as setting up rules and regulations they had to keep, and when they did, God would fulfill them, or reward them, with wholeness. That isn't grace at all. It isn't gift at all.

The story doesn't change until we come to the part about Jesus. He, expressed in a nut shell, believed the grace. He believed himself to be in the image of God, to be loved unconditionally, to have been given the gift of wholeness, of completeness, of fulfillment, and proceeded to live as if it were true. The very sketchy material of the Gospel, I believe, presents an accounting of a person who does live a life of response to Grace, despite the fact that the authors appear clearly to cling to the works belief, and the concept of God that goes with it.

And so Jesus lived out what it means to believe oneself to be a creation in the image of God, loved unconditionally. He simply lived it, taught it, expressed it.

In the process, he was an incredible threat to those who had decided that the way of life was the way of works – of law – and who had the power, as they saw it, to maintain that lifestyle and to impose it on the general population. They knew enough, however, to know that if the general population bought what Jesus was teaching and living out, they were done for. They would experience the death that inevitably goes with a Theology of Works anyway, but they were going to do everything they could to protect themselves from that death.

So they decided they had better get rid of Jesus.

“It's better that one man should die, than that all of us should die.” they said. They proceeded to bring to bear upon Jesus all the power they had to try to silence him. They persuaded the people to cry out for his crucifixion.

Though they were a small group, they were able to make the Roman Empire do what they wanted. They ended up getting Jesus on blasphemy charges, which, ordinarily had no significance in Roman government. They managed to get Pilate to order Jesus to be crucified. They went through all of the travesty of a trial. Jesus was put through all that suffering and ended up on the cross. They killed his body.

When Jesus knew, or sensed, that the attacks on him were coming, he was again faced with having to decide what he was going to do. He still could decide to try to save himself, to try to be his own god, to try to provide the fullness of life for himself. In short, he could try to protect himself against being killed. He did not make that decision. The disciples were scared and did decide that they had better protect themselves. They disclaimed being disciples. They left him stranded. They succumbed to their fear and were no help to him at all.

If Jesus had said at that point, "It's more important that I preserve myself than that I live out what I have professed to believe and have believed all the time about God's grace and about who I am by God's grace," he would have decided for his life to be over. If Jesus had chosen to use his power to preserve himself, he would indeed have been dead. His message to the world, to his disciples, to whoever, would have been, "All that I've been living out, all that I've been teaching, is not true. When push comes to shove, when the test is on, I choose to try to protect myself."

What Jesus chose was to continue to live out his affirmative response to the unconditional love of God. He did not condemn Pilate. He did not condemn the soldiers. He did not condemn the Jewish hierarchy. He did not reject anybody. He did not cry out against them. He suffered what they, in their desperation, did to try to protect themselves.

And so He went to the cross, to his body's death, to the grave.

I think it's very interesting to note that the resurrection scriptures are significant in what they don't say, as well as in what they say. What they say is that the disciples realized Jesus was alive. The symbol of his aliveness is an empty tomb. He is not in the tomb. He is alive!

In the concept of Grace Theology, as I understand it, what they were saying was, "What he lived and what he stood for is where life is." What those who put him on a cross stood for and tried to live out is where death is. All the way back to the Genesis story, the trust-love relationship is where life is. The realization that God has already given us wholeness, eternal life, is where life is. And that, in so far as I can tell, is the

message of the life of Jesus as we have it in the Gospels. And the message keeps coming through. It's in that context that "God so loved the world" has such meaning. God loved the world so much that, in a human being, God lived out what it means to be the recipient of God's grace. And whenever you or I look at that life lived and believe it with our own lives, then we express and experience the eternal life that God gave us in the first place.