

Gift And Grace

John R Gavazzoni

April, 1999

God is writing a book in this hour, a living theological treatise. His theme, which will run through it from beginning to end is the preeminence of gift and grace in the administration of His Kingdom. This book is comprised of living epistles, "written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts," bound together to become the apocalyptic book of life (II Cor. 3:3: Rev. 19:12). Our Lord is passionately desirous and fiercely determined to make it clear to His saints that there be no faulty translation, no footnotes according to the religious traditions of men, no pages inserted from another gospel. Although the entire book, which we are, must be thoroughly purged of these things, I have sensed a constant and growing pressure in my spirit, a communion with the Holy Spirit concerning His priority of bringing to the fore those chapters devoted particularly to the magnificence and boundless scope of His gift and His grace. They flow one into the other and each is implied by the other.

In respect to the incalculable value He places on this quality of His nature, our Father is inflexible and immutable. On this point He is a purist. His position is nonnegotiable. Nothing shall stand, nothing shall abide, nothing shall endure, nothing shall reach its fullest fruition, it's final consummation, its ultimate potential except it is as His gift and by His grace. There is nothing in God's scheme of things that picks up where grace leaves off, rather, the gift of grace always and inevitably takes over when all else has failed and it exposes the inferiority of everything else that claims a right to run in the race and to hope for glory. One by one, exhausted and breathless, they drop out, until grace, and grace alone, having what it takes, finishes with a shout of triumph!

I will borrow from the king of rock and roll and suggest to the church a synonym for the promised land, Graceland, and emphatically declare that there is no land in God's economy named Meritland. It is a land given, (Jos. 1:2, 3, 11, 13) and every battle won and every enemy

defeated in the possessing of it is a gift of grace. All that pertains to the Lord's redemptive relationship with us fits with undeniable propriety under the heading of gift. As the scriptures are open to us by the Spirit and we are enabled to walk with the Lord some distance, He brings us to a place of honesty about ourselves and it becomes the most self-evident of truths, that there is no dimension of our relationship with the Father that is not an aspect of His gift.

Do not hold me to a word perfect recollection but I believe in His classic *The Normal Christian Life*, Watchman Nee expressed it beautifully when he said that God was not a retailer dispensing packets of grace, here, a little of this, and there, a little of that but, He has only one thing to give us, His Son. The Father's gift to us is His Son. (Jn. 3: 16). This gift is the gift of aionian life (Rom. 6:23, literal Greek). It is Christ Himself indwelling time and indwelling me, penetrating my death and imparting Himself to me as life. He has united Himself with me, and in that union I enjoy the same relationship He has with the Father. (Rom 8:16, 17). The person is the gift; the Person is the life and He is my life. (Col. 3:4). They are one in the same. Here it is: (I Jn. 5: 20). Let's take the time to look at that neglected verse. "We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life." When He is revealed in all His glory, we shall be revealed with Him in that same glory. (Col. 1: 27, II Thes. 1:10).

I must restate it for clarity: Christ is the life of eternity who has been injected by the Father into time, and here in our dimension, He has become to us aionian life, that is, age during, age abiding, age pertaining life, to once and for all conquer death and all that pertains to it on its own turf. (If the reader is not familiar with the concept of aionian life, he or she should reread the gospel of John particularly noting that everywhere everlasting or eternal life is mentioned, the correct translation is aionian life.) The subject of that gospel is that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). The Eternal One became the aionian One without ceasing to be the Eternal One and remains in the age(s) by His Spirit dynamically working until all that is temporal is reconstituted by the Eternal.

Eph. 2:8,9,10 tells us that this gift, by grace through faith, results in a "workmanship." The gift of God is not merely an introductory phase or elementary aspect of Christ's saving work. The gift carries all the way to a finished work, a work of glory! It is a gift in inception, through the long discipline process and on to completion. The pressure in my spirit compels me to say over and over again and in every possible way, it is a gift, by grace, from alpha to omega. By this gift we are born again, grow in grace and are finally manifested as sons of glory to the satisfaction of all creation (Rom. 8: 18-23). He, who is the fullness of the Godhead bodily, (Col. 2:9) living His life in us, will cause us, together with Him, to "be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:19). Jesus' prayer will be fully answered as we are given the glory that the Father has given to Jesus (Jn. 17:22). Paul's expectation that we will be "built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit," will be realized. (Eph. 2:22). And our cry of praise will be "Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!" (II Cor. 9:15).

But there persists today a stubborn and strategic misunderstanding in the church in regard to the extent of the gracious gift of God. In spite of a great outpouring of the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, and in spite of a great unveiling of "present truth," we still have a lingering hang up. It goes something like this: Salvation is a gift of God, by grace through faith (so far so good) but real discipleship and serious Christian living demands more than a freebie from God. If we're to get the job done, they say, more is required than the free gift of God. We're going to have to dig down and give it our best, "our utmost for His highest" (to quote a famous devotional book). Of course, they concede, that we need God's help (gotta throw the Almighty a bone) but, let's face it we'll have to grit our teeth, clench our fists, set our face like a flint and with square jaw do what's necessary to get the job done. We've got to pay the price, incur whatever cost, praise the Lord, pass the ammunition and damn the torpedoes! After all, we are expected to throw our every resource into the fray. Thus goes the conventional wisdom.

It is a sour, serpentine element contaminating in one way or another nearly all Christian teaching. It either suggests, demands, or at least leaves the gate wide open for the inference that we cannot have God's best unless we give Him the best in us. Isn't God worthy of our best? No! He is worthy of "His best in us," Christ, the hope of glory!

(Col. 2:27). It seems that what we're saying is that Christ is poised with all His potential awaiting the moment when we will jump start Him into glorious action by some supreme act of self sacrifice and heroic determination. We have an idea that, self can deny self and do it without thought of glory, and if you believe that, there's a bridge in Brooklyn I'd like to sell you. We are infected with the idea that the gift of the grace of God is only foundational, and if we are to build up the habitation of God and complete the upper levels we must add other material. Now what would that additional material be if it were not pure grace and free gift? The only thing left is that which can be contributed by self, namely, self-righteousness. Of course at this point the serpent teaching becomes extremely subtle.

We are not urged to become involved in obviously dead religious works, instead we are reminded of the necessity of our willingness to let God do the work in us. Pretty tricky, but wait. Hold it. Whoa. Stop the presses! Did someone say "let God?" Let God? Out of what corner of hell did that concept creep? Why, it is considered a sign of tenderest of sensibility and finest insights when Christian leaders urge the saints to let God do this and that. I imagine that the angels of God blush less at the sight of pornography that they do at the suggestion that puny mortals can let God do anything. In regard to men it can be said that God permits but in regard to God it must never be said that man permits. Does He, who put the stars in place and hung the world in space, who created all things and sustains them by the Word of His power need man's permission to proceed in any matter? Such a thought creates the absurd impression that the angels and the encompassing cloud of witnesses are anxiously wringing their hands as they view the battle down here and hoping that we will permit God to get on with His will. The equivalent of thunder, lightning and earth quakes roll forth from my spirit at the audacity of such a thought.

The theology that is the basis for this nonsense asserts that God has created in man a dimension of sovereignty apart from His own: a place within man where, after God has done all He can to influence him in a gentlemanly way, man alone makes the crucial decision, becomes willing or unwilling, surrenders or rebels, accepts or rejects God's plan for His life. Without shame, otherwise intelligent men believe and teach that the extent of God's ultimate success and the

degree to which He will be permitted to carry out His desire hinges on the whim and caprice of human choice. This doctrine is called "free will." It is, in practical terms, esteemed as a truth almost as important as anything believed by the church in general. The average Christian would be dumbfounded to discover that men like Charles H. Spurgeon and Martin Luther thought the idea to be more than ludicrous. Upon final analysis man becomes the ultimate sovereign and God ends up hoping to salvage some jot or tittle of His desires. If we carry this to a logical conclusion God would end up in a state of disappointment and frustration and go off sulking into a corner of heaven with His tiny remnant to vent His frustration by tormenting forever those who would not let Him love them the way He wanted to. It is a testimony to the grace of God that people are still reached with some truth in spite of such tripe!

In spite of the fact that He still blesses His believers, nevertheless, we are found guilty of a doctrinal atrocity when we continue to think that anything about our salvation or Christian life has to do with us, rather than with God. In fact, the scriptures urge us to, in effect, to let go, to yield, to surrender, and to submit to the loving will of our Father, but the language in such passages, taken in context, never puts man in the driver's seat or implies that we have the final say in allowing God to have His way in us. Such passages are expressions of the ultimately irresistible love of God that "never fails." (I Cor 13:8). And that love, joined with His perfect wisdom and overflowing grace, will, in His good time, overcome our resistance and we will melt into the everlasting arms. We are called upon to respond, but the initiative, ability, power and momentum of our response, originate and consummate in God. I have heard preachers solemnly berate their Christian audiences blatantly declaring that they have tied God's hands so that He is powerless to bless them and bless others through them. What needs to be tied (and again in God's good time) is their tongues.

Only Christ can bring a person to the place of cooperation with the divine will. Until Christ comes to us with the willingness of the Father we are not free to choose anything in the spiritual realm. The Bible is very clear; "If therefore the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed." (Jn. 8: 36). Men argue about the sovereignty of God and the free will of man, but never have I heard those who debate this

endlessly, ever raise the issue of the free will of God. Only the Lord has a truly free will, a will unfettered in any way, a will that will permit nothing, including the will of man to stand in the way of His fulfilling His desire. Only as we are brought into communion and participation in God's free will can we be free. We are men and women bound in mind, emotion and will until the Son sets us free, and this is true not only of the inception of a walk with God but on through to maturity. How very clear was John Newton when he wrote, "Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come. 'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home."

Let me now seem to contradict myself, but not really. God in His sovereign grace works with us where we are and brings us along tenderly and graciously and allows us to receive nourishment even when it is laced with poison, and weaves into His plan the side effects of such a diet until we can digest pure food. I know. I've been there. The understanding that God must do it all, yes all, from the willing to the performing (Phil. 2:13), is too much for all but those who are trained to eat meat (Heb. 5:14). For a season He permits the delusion that we can contribute something to His work and then gradually and with great surety, He leads us inevitably to the knowledge of the "allness" of Christ. We must be "strengthened with might in the inner man" (Eph. 3:16), in order to receive and assimilate such revelation. Until then we often venture out on the sea of life in the tiny skiff of our over valued willingness to obey God only to be driven back time and time again and find our will, yes, the will to do good, broken and splintered on the jagged rocks of our lives. (Rom. 7:18,19).

If you find this depressing, you are missing the point. In all of this, the Lord is moving toward total victory for Himself and for you. The law plays an important part in this, for though the dispensation of the law has ended, it persists in our conscience and it will always hedge us in to Christ. The law always confronts a man with the challenge to find something in and of himself that God deems acceptable. This presents itself as such an inviting wide gate and broad way that we rush through the gate and run down the way carrying all the excess baggage of those things that are gain to us and of which we can boast. But, it is a delusion and leads to destruction. Thank God! Let the man of self righteousness, self effort and self will be destroyed (rendered useless). Then we are ready for the confining gate and the

narrow way through which only those emptied of self can enter and upon which only Christ in us can walk. That blessed path leads to life.

As I traced this truth back to its root I came to the life of Christ and especially His life relationship to the Father. I remembered Jesus' statement, "The Father has life in Himself and He giveth the Son to have life in Himself" (Jn. 5:26). Clearly we see in this verse that our Lord's life was a gift from the Father, "He giveth the Son." I am not remotely suggesting that there was ever a time that the Father and Son did not share equally the life of Deity. For the Son is eternally begotten of the Father. I am saying that the gift of life eternally flows from Father to Son and that at the very heart of and according to the nature of the life of Christ we find that it is a life given.

Even though He became flesh His relationship to the Father was not essentially altered. He is, was, and always shall be "the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature" (Heb. 1:3). The life of Christ in both time and eternity is a gift from the Father, and that life has in it all the attributes of God including the Father's will, willingness and will power. "The Father giveth the Son (that's gift) to have life in Himself" (Jn. 5:26). (That's grace). Even the Son of God had nothing that He would boast of, for He contributed nothing; He added nothing to that life.

The Father eternally gifted the Son with His life and with it the equality with the Father inherent in that life. This life from eternity continued to characterize Christ on earth as it flowed, in Him, into time and was embodied by Him. As He wrought His mighty works His testimony was, "The Son can nothing of Himself" (Jn. 5:19). Also He asserted, "The Father in me does His works" (Jn. 14:10). That is why we will crash upon the rocks if we try to live contrary to the principle of gift and grace for it is of the very nature of the Godhead.

When you seek to find the life of Christ within, look for that life that can do nothing of itself and thus does everything that pleases the Father. (Jn 8:29) Christ spoke often of His works, "The works that I do" (Jn 5:36) and at the same time denied that He did them. The ultimate secret of Christ's life was His self emptying, (Phil. 2:7) but, if we were to inquire of Him if even that was His doing He would deny it. I am convinced that it can be accurately said that the source of

Christ's self emptying was that same quality as it is found in His Father. The Father is eternally full because He always empties Himself into His Son and through His Son into all creation and this is paradoxically the secret of His fullness. With God there is no stagnation.

I do not want to be misunderstood, so I will take pains not to be. I resist all timidity in forthrightly asserting the truth that it is God's gracious gift of Himself to us and only that which will take us from sin's dungeon to the glory of manifested sonship. But, I am not saying that it is handed to us on a platter as we lie on the proverbial "pink cloud and bed of roses." It is given to us in the midst of "much tribulation," through which we enter the kingdom (Acts 14:22). It is given to us when the flesh cries, "Enough! I want to turn back." It is given to us when hot tears drench our faces as all that is precious to us is snatched away. It is given to us when all human endurance fails and every hoarded resource is exhausted. When we have failed again and again and again, still He gives. When we cannot bear our own spiritual impotence, He gives. In the wonderful words of the hymn, "He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater. He giveth more strength when the labors increase. To added affliction, He addeth His mercy, to multiplied trials His multiplied peace."

And the exquisite final line, "For out of His infinite riches in Jesus He giveth and giveth and giveth again." God does not pay wages though, during the interposition of the law, it may appear so. He gives gifts and His gifts are summed up in the gift of His Son. It is sin that pays wages of death. (Rom. 6:23). No man can give to God and thereby make God his debtor. Grace by its nature is unearned and it flows out of the heart of the giver who needs only his own love to precipitate the giving. Karl Barth said that the gospel demands response and provides what it demands. In relationship to God we are responders not initiators. We respond to the initiative of His love and His initiative is the force behind our response and is the very substance of that response. He leads, we follow; this is the dance of grace.

The Apostle Paul pointed out how the life of Abraham was a kind of living allegory, a living picture of new covenant relationship with God. And his own life beautifully portrayed the same. He knew that God "had set (him) apart even from (his) mother's womb" (Gal. 1:15). How

many sermons have been preached about Paul's conversion, (Acts 9: 1-20) and yet we miss the obvious. When the Lord of glory confronted Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus, did He meekly seek permission to be Saul's Lord? Or did He boldly lay claim to Saul as His own by creation and by redemption? If you will read the account again with an open mind, you will certainly concede that it is the latter. There is no polite civility characterizing the Master's claim on Saul's life. What there is, is blatantly intrusive authority. Certainly it is love that intrudes so boldly, but intrude it does! Willfully and majestically He lays claim to that which He has purchased with His own blood. No long patient knocking, no plaintive appeal, no "free will" options. The Lamb of God roars, pounces, and Saul of Tarsus is no more. In His place is "Paul, an Apostle of Jesus Christ, by the will of God" (Eph. 1:11).

This brings us to the subject of lordship. As in the case of us "letting God," our speech once again betrays our self idolatry and self righteousness. Recently I heard a well-known Christian leader give an invitation at the close of a TV program. In the invitation he used a very common choice of phraseology in the world of modern evangelism. He urged his viewers to "make Jesus your Lord." This was a man who is very knowledgeable about many Biblical subjects and a brother that God has used to bring many to Christ. Yet, his understanding of the nature of Christ's Lordship is sadly lacking. I do not say this judgmentally for so was mine once upon a time. The Apostle Peter, preaching on the day of Pentecost, establishes a precedent for a true understanding of Jesus as Lord. Having declared that God delivered up Jesus of Nazareth according to His predetermined plan into the hands of sinful men to be crucified, Peter goes on to make it very clear that God raised Him from the dead (with no help from us) and exalted Him to His right hand. Now please note the source of Christ's Lordship as we quote Acts 2:36. "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." There it is.

It was predetermined that men should crucify Christ but, that God would make Him Lord. Men crucify; God exalts. During a later occasion, Peter sets this truth in bedrock and declares in Acts 10:36 that Jesus Christ is Lord of all. God wanted Jesus to be your Lord and so He made Him that and it's settled. He didn't need your

agreement. He did it by His own act and edict. It is given to us, under the wooing of the Holy Spirit to confess Him as Lord, (Rom. 10:9) but only God can make Him Lord. He is not one whit more your Lord after you confess Him than before you do. The difference is that you begin to enjoy Him in His exaltation. Every man and women in their own order will be brought to see Christ in His glory but He will not do this fully and finally until the church is cleansed of its idolatrous misunderstanding of who is responsible for making Christ who He is. The devil may make false claim to men's souls but the Good Shepherd will not let the thief finally get away with it. We are all His, bought with a price, the precious blood of Christ and when Hades has served its God intended purpose all creation shall be set free. Jubilee! All creation shall return to its original owner because "The earth is the Lord's and all it contains, the world and those who dwell in it" (Ps. 24:1).

As the Kingdom of God dawns the preaching of the Gospel will be purged of Babylonian innovations and we will no longer urge men to do what only God can do but we will proclaim the Lordship of Christ, a Lordship established by God alone. The proclamation will be endowed with the power of a people "filled up to all the fullness of God," (Eph. 3:19) and all will believe and confess what is already true, not what they can make true by their will and their believing. Christ will be Lord of all, because He is Lord of all! The kingdom will come on earth because the earth belongs to the King. All men will be forgiven because all men are forgiven. All things will be as they are, for nothing will be permitted that is contrary to reality. There will be no hostility, alienation or enmity, for in Christ all things have been reconciled to God. The reality, the message and the experience will all be one.

I am beside myself to make this clear. There is only one life in the universe with the unswerving willingness, devotion, consecration and obedience required to deliver up the kingdom to the Father that God may be all in all. (I Cor. 15:24-28). That is the life of the Lord Jesus Christ who, in turn, derives His life from the Father. He will so work in us so that He will displace our willingness, devotion and resolve so that no flesh shall glory in His sight. "The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this." (Isa. 9:7). We who have been called to "press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ

Jesus" (Phil. 3:14), are being introduced to that place of union with Christ where we do nothing out from ourselves and for this very reason we will do all things through Christ.

Prophetic word: We are fast approaching that blessed place of absolute stillness before God, that mystical place of the cessation of all human self striving and at that very point He will appear in all His glory.

Stay tuned for future serious, seminal samplings.

John Gavazzoni