

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Incomparable Christ - Christ acts in sovereign grace

In this series we are thinking about the 'Incomparable Christ'. There are many people who are happy to accept that Jesus Christ was a great teacher and a remarkable person, but not somebody utterly unique. They might acknowledge Him as one of history's great philosophers, a prophet or guru, but not an unequalled man, who was also God.

Most would accept, at least, that Christ was more than a smooth talker, out to make money from His teaching. There were many people in Jesus' day, and there are still many in our time, who taught whatever would attract a following. They did so, partly because they liked to be admired, and partly because they could make a good living from their followers. Christ cannot be compared to these charlatans, who taught whatever mixture of falsehood and half truths was most likely to maximise their personal gain.

One of the features that distinguishes Jesus Christ is the grace that He showed to all kinds of people. He spoke freely, and plainly, to people of all classes and characters, and He healed everybody who asked. In fact, Jesus sometimes blessed, or healed, those who did **not** ask. A tax collector, called Zacchaeus, climbed up a tree to watch Jesus pass by. There is no record of him speaking a word to Jesus, let alone making a request, before Jesus stops, calls the man down and declares that He is coming to stay at Zacchaeus' house! Later Jesus declares, "Today salvation has come to this house." You can read the story in Luke 19:1-10. I suppose Zacchaeus made some movement towards Christ by finding a place where Jesus would be passing by. The man at the pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-15) made no such move.

John 5:6 says, "When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he had already been in that condition a long time, He said to him, 'Do you want to be made well?'" The initiative came from Jesus, not the infirm man. One final example is even more clear cut. Luke 7:11-17 gives us the account of Jesus coming into the city of Nain. On arrival, Jesus saw the funeral procession of a young man who had been the only son of a widowed mother (Luke 17:12). Luke tells us that, "When the Lord saw her, He had compassion on her" (Luke 17:13) Jesus then raises the young man from the dead (Luke 17:14). The young man certainly made no request to be healed: it was entirely beyond his abilities! Even the widow made no request. Jesus acted on His own initiative and from His own motives. In short, Jesus acted in sovereign grace.

To help us understand what sovereign grace means, and to tease out of few of the ways in which Christ is quite unique, I am going to consider the topics of sovereignty and grace separately, and then try and put them back together.

In Matthew 7:28-29 we read, "And so it was, when Jesus had ended these sayings, that the people were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." I am going to look for a few minutes at three ways in which a speaker might have authority and see how that helps us with our first topic of sovereignty.

The authority of knowledge

When we talk about somebody being an authority on a subject, we mean that they have a level of knowledge that sets them apart as an expert. When they speak on that subject, they speak with a confidence, and a clarity, that impresses us. When I was a young laboratory scientist, still leaning my job, and following part time studies, a group of us that studied together would occasionally discuss some aspect of transfusion science.

One day we had debated a point for quite some time, and not reached any consensus, so we asked an older colleague who was also a part time lecturer on our courses. When he had talked us through things for a few minutes, we thanked him for his opinion and said that we still weren't sure what the true position was. Rather pointedly, he told us he had not given us 'his opinion' but the facts, and the 'true position' was exactly what he had just said! He, with some justification, thought we had a cheek putting his understanding on the same level as ours. We, with the arrogance of young people everywhere, thought he was rather too confident of his own position. And perhaps we were partly right. It was true, he knew considerably more than us, but he was not a world authority on the topic. When Christ spoke, there was often a sharply divided response. Some heard His words as having a ring of authority that they had

never previously encountered, the authority of a complete and total expert. Others thought He had a real cheek making out that He had more authority than them. The scribes and Pharisees relied for their authority on quoting past rabbis and teachers. To them, a point was proved if you could show that it had been taught by a great man of the past. Their knowledge was second hand and derived, a bit like my colleague and lecturer. Jesus spoke as if His words had an authority all of their own. This made Him greater than the scribes, and greater even than the rabbis of the past. It was why so many thought He was on a par with the prophets of the Old Testament, who brought messages with the uncompromising authority of those who speak on behalf of God Himself. In fact Jesus went even further. The characteristic phrase of the Old Testament prophet was, "Thus says the LORD..." In other words, a prophet, even the greatest of them, such as Moses and Elijah, derived his authority from God. His words had to be listened to because he was simply repeating God's own words. When Jesus taught He said things like, "But I say to you..." (e.g. Matthew 5:22,28, 32, 34, 44) He implied that He was speaking from His own authority, but He put that authority on the same level as God's own words! Therefore, Christ cannot be compared to the prophets, or even Moses.

Moral Authority

When you are speaking on the subject of science, geography or modern languages your authority is solely grounded in your level of knowledge and insight. When you speak on social and moral issues there are other things to consider. A teacher of ethics may have unparalleled knowledge, great ability in applying that knowledge to particular circumstances and outstanding communication skills, but they can still have their authority fatally undermined if we know that they behave totally unethically in their private lives. We talk about people having 'moral authority', when how they live is consistent with what they say. We immediately think of people like Ghandi, who not only called for 'passive resistance' to British rule in India, but was prepared to put it into practise, and live with the consequences.

This was another way in which Christ was distinguished from the other teachers of His day. He was scathing about the way the Pharisees taught one thing and did another. The accusation of hypocrisy has always been a potent one. Few politicians survive being shown to exhort one thing in public, and practise another in private. When accused, they will often claim that their opponents are bigger hypocrites than they are! The Pharisees must have deeply resented the strident charges of hypocrisy Jesus laid against them. If they could have made a charge of hypocrisy stick against Him, they would certainly have done so. But the fact was, that nobody could find the slightest inconsistency between what Jesus said and what He did. It adds a deep moral authority to His perfect authority of knowledge, and shows that Christ cannot be compared to the scribes and Pharisees.

Legal or Political Authority

There is another kind of authority that we often speak about, and this one brings us closer to our topic of sovereignty. The authority of a policeman, parent or executive may have some connection to their knowledge, but it is really derived from some kind of hierarchy. I may be more intelligent, and much better informed, than the policeman who is arresting me, but, if he caught me breaking a window, he has all the authority of the law behind him! Children often believe that they know much more than their parents, but a parent has the authority to control things like bedtime, pocket money and punishment! Christ might have taught with incomparable insight, and backed that up with perfect moral authority, but did He have any hierarchical authority to enforce His teaching? At first glance the answer seems to be an emphatic no. After all Jesus held no positions of power within the Jewish or Roman hierarchies of His day. Indeed, those two authorities finally combined to order, and carry out, His execution. But we should not confuse the possession of authority with the exercise of it. We realise that an executive may have the power to 'hire and fire' his staff, without using that authority every day. He might have enough authority to direct everything one of his staff does, and countermand any decisions he does not like, but he will not normally exercise those powers very often. Likewise, Christ did not routinely exercise His authority when He was in this world, but that does not mean He did not possess it. We see this authority on a small number of occasions, and are reminded just how great it was. Christ gave commands to the water and weather (Mark 4:35-40), and they were instantly obeyed. He gave commands to dead bodies (usually a very futile activity!) and they obeyed Him, and came back to life! (John 11:43) He ordered around demons and, though they must have fiercely wished to resist, they did just what He said (Matthew 8:32). In short, He occasionally acted, and often spoke, as if He was the ruler of angels, men, demons and all of creation. He claimed for Himself the full sovereignty of God, and He did so while he was living as a human being in this world.

In fact, there are some powers we should be very thankful are never exercised. The president of the USA has the power to order nuclear strikes that could destroy the majority of the world we live in. I might reason from the fact that neither the current president, nor his predecessors, has ever exercised that power, to the conclusion that, in fact, they really don't have such a power at all. I would, of course, be wrong! I should instead be grateful that they have never felt the necessity to use the authority they have.

Sovereignty

Authority is never a very popular term, unless I happen to be the one who has the authority! Sovereignty is perhaps

even more unpopular. It implies one person having power over another and, perhaps because this situation has so often been abused in the past, we associate the concept with oppression. Absolute sovereignty is even more problematic. Most sovereignty is restricted in some way. The sovereign of the United Kingdom has only ceremonial and honorific authority. Her actual sovereignty is strictly limited. Even the most absolute of monarchs is restricted by their geography. That is, they are only an absolute ruler within their own kingdom. When we talk about the sovereignty of Christ, we are considering absolute rule in all places. People sometimes make the mistake of thinking that the Bible teaches a form of dualism. Dualism is the belief that there are two powers in the universe: one is purely evil, and the other is purely good. The two powers are always in conflict. Sometimes one has the upper hand, sometimes the other. The final outcome is never quite certain. If you substitute God for the good power, and Satan for the evil one, some would claim, you have summarised the story of the Bible. But this is to make a fundamental mistake. The Bible does not represent Satan as an evil power on an equal level with God. The Bible asserts that God created Satan, and retains far more power than him. In fact Satan's authority is limited by what God allows him, and Satan's final defeat is certain, and already determined. Christ, in His sovereignty, cannot be compared to the God of Dualism.

Grace

We don't normally connect the words 'sovereign' and 'grace'. We often see sovereign power used for cruelty, or self service, so 'sovereign grace' is a little unexpected. On the other hand, grace does imply some element of sovereignty. If to act in grace is to give something good to a person who does not deserve it, then we are implying that the gracious person is exercising some level of free choice to give something that nobody can compel them to give. I see grace as being something more than the occasional whim of a wealthy person. I was told recently of a well paid football star who, when paying for his fuel in a petrol station, declared that he would pay the bills of everybody else in the station at that time. Now that was generous, and I'm sure I would have gladly let him pay for my fuel, but it was a one off act that cost him a comparatively tiny proportion of his salary. When I think of Christ acting in grace, I think of three elements.

1. The giving was regular, frequent and altogether in keeping with the rest of His character.
2. His giving was on an enormous scale.
3. His giving was truly costly to Himself.

Christ cannot be compared to the harsh gods of ancient civilisations, who were always demanding more sacrifices, or constantly had to have their anger appeased: gods who seemed to be completely capricious, and whose outbursts could never be predicted or explained. Nor can He be compared to any current day god who is not capable of showing grace and forgiveness to those who have done wrong.

We easily fall into the trap of thinking that grace is, in some way, earned or compulsory. We might not go as far as the poet Heinrich Heine with his famous deathbed saying, "Of course God will forgive me; that's his job.", but we imply something like it. We think that everybody **deserves** a second chance, or that if God is gracious to one individual, He is morally obliged to be equally gracious to everyone. We think that we deserve God's blessing today because we have got through eight hours without any blatantly obvious sin! In all of these ways, Paul would accuse of making "grace, no longer grace" (Romans 11:6). The bald truth is, that every time anybody gets any blessing from God, they get it because of God's grace.

We know that this grace needs a just foundation; otherwise it will compromise God's own character. We also know that the just basis for the grace of God is the sacrificial death of His own Son, the very Christ we are speaking about. Therefore Christ's sovereign grace has two immovable foundations: His own death and resurrection, and His sovereign freedom, as God, to give His gifts to those whom He chooses.

For these reasons Christ cannot be compared to the distant, detached God of Deism. A god who made a world that still bears signs of his craftsmanship, but then removed himself to a distance, where he passively watches his creatures struggle. Christ is seen caring passionately about the world and creatures that He made, and acting, at great personal cost, to rescue them.

Christ cannot be compared to the impersonal god of Buddhism, or other pantheistic religions. In these systems of thought, god is everywhere and in everything. Nothing can be said to be fully good or bad, since everything is part of god. Nor, in pantheism, can god be thought to have the characteristics of a person, such as feelings or individual existence. The God the Bible presents is the maker and sustainer of everything, but can always be distinguished from what He has made.

He is the first, and ultimate, individual, and human beings are made individuals in His image. He loves, hates, feels sorrow and joy in ways that are on a vastly bigger scale, and higher plane, than we experience, but are still recognisably the same emotions. In Christ, God added humanity to His deity, so that He could enter into His own creation in a new way. This brought His personhood into even greater relief.

Conclusion

We have found that nobody is like Christ, in His authority and sovereignty, or His grace. When we see Him acting in sovereign grace, we see Him acting in a totally unique way, but in a way totally consistent with who He is.

Let us be thankful that Christ has acted in grace towards us: a totally unwarranted, sovereign grace, and let us worship the incomparable Christ today, with a new vigour and conviction.

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