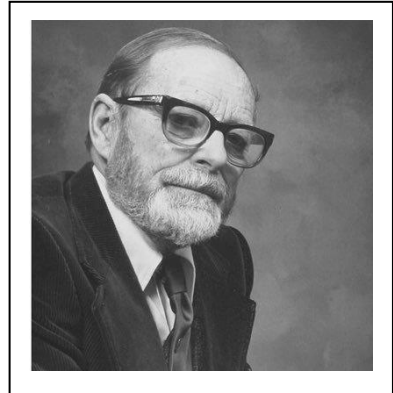


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The Leaven of Synergism

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Throughout the centuries since God covenanted to save man through the sacrifice of his Son, Jesus Christ, whereby He provided a full, perfect, and sufficient satisfaction for our sins, one aberration of the Gospel has recurrently threatened the truth. It is the view that man must make some contribution himself in securing his salvation. It is not the size of this contribution that is the important factor, but *the necessity of it*.



It is as though healing is promised to a terminally ill patient if only he will prepare himself in some way, or yield himself, or present himself at his own expense before the physician. The Roman Catholic Church holds strongly to the view that some self-preparation is essential, usually in the form of a willingness to make amends for wrongs done, or to effect some self-correction in order to merit the grace of God. The Lutherans place the emphasis on the necessity of man's willingness to accept God's salvation. Modern evangelism calls upon men to "make an active decision" as though to pick up the phone and arrange an appointment. Or the patient is invited at least to unlock the door before the physician can make this call and heal him. This door is locked on the inside and can be unlocked only by the patient.

But there is no question of the patient's healing himself. On this there is a wide measure of unanimity. He does need the Saviour; but he is not considered to be without any ability to assist in some way, or at least to co-operate in the healing process, though the measure of his co-operation may amount to no more than that he allow the physician to visit his soul.

Whatever form the human contribution takes, it always means that salvation is a co-operative activity. Salvation is not a God-only process, but a God-and process. This working together is termed Synergism. Such Synergism was a religious philosophy with humanistic overtones even in Old Testament times, and it has been in evidence in every generation. It is man's demand not to be considered impotent, Man admits his sickness, but he is unwilling to admit his death.

Theologically, Synergism is fatal to any sound Christian soteriology, for it is a denial of man's total bondage in sin and a claim to some remaining will to absolute good. By and

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large, the Greek Fathers were always content to place the grace of God and the free will of man side by side, and as a consequence, the Greek Catholic Church early assumed a synergistic position. The Roman Catholic Church followed suit—though somewhat more slowly. Since the Council of Trent it has held dogmatically that man prepares himself and disposes his own heart to receive the grace of justification.¹

The Reformation was a total break with this almost universal teaching, a recovery of a truly monergistic doctrine of salvation, a *Solus Deus* position. But like all other revivals of the truth of the Gospel, it soon began to be plagued by those who demanded that allowance be made for man's autonomy if he was not to be a mere puppet, some tiny admission of spiritual competence, some small part which man might be called upon to play, as a sound basis for exhortation in preaching the Gospel and as an incentive to those striving after holiness.

Luther himself was wholly committed to a God-only position. Unregenerate man is spiritually dead, not perfectly well as Pelagius held, nor merely sick as Arminius held, but completely dead as Calvin held. We have already traced briefly the gradual leavening of Luther's position by the synergistic tendencies of those who followed him [Chapter 4]. This fatal return to the heresy of all ages was, in Germany, largely the result of one man, Melancthon (1497—1560).

It was this godly and gentle man whose humanistic influence introduced once again the corrupting stream into Lutheran theology, where it took the seemingly harmless form of attributing to man nothing of a positive nature but only a non-resistance to the overtures of God without which the Holy Spirit is unable to make the grace of God effectual unto salvation. Luther was aware of this tendency from its first re-appearance among his disciples and spoke out strongly against it. He said (in *Table Talk*, under the heading "Of Free Will"):²

Some allege that the Holy Spirit works not in those that resist Him but only in such as are willing and give consent thereto, whence it follows that free will is a cause and helper of faith; and consequently the Holy Ghost does not work alone through the word, but that our will does something therein.

But *I say it is not so; the will of man works not at all* in his conversion and justification ... It is a matter on which the Holy Spirit works (as a potter makes a pot out of clay), equally in those that are averse and remiss as in St. Paul. But after the Holy

¹ Louis Berkof, *History of Christian Thought*, London, Banner of Truth Trust, 1975, p.146.

² Luther: quoted by W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, vol.II, p.474.

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Spirit has wrought in the wills of such resisters, then He also manages that the will be consenting thereto.

Luther agreed that Melancthon seemed to be asking very little when he proposed that we grant only man's non-resistance as his contribution. But Luther warned that this "very little" was more dangerous than the "very much" that the Pelagians demanded when they argued that man was wholly capable of meriting the grace of God, for it had the appearance of a relatively harmless concession whereas in fact it was a fatal one. For those who support it are teaching that "we are able to obtain righteousness and grace by that 'very little'." The Pelagians struck Luther as being more forthright. He saw Melancthon's apparently mild concession as the more dangerous because it was less patent. The very violence of his diatribe against Erasmus in his famous work on *The Bondage of the Will* stemmed from the subtlety of this synergistic position. And in this connection Luther wrote:³

These [Pelagians] assert that it is not a certain little something in us by which we obtain grace, but we obtain it by whole, full, perfect, great and many efforts and works. Our adversaries [the followers of Melancthon], however, declare that it is a mere trifle and practically nothing at all by which we merit grace.

And here, as Luther saw it, was the danger. It is no longer the Gospel of the Sovereign Grace of God that we are proclaiming, but the delusion of the sovereignty of man who in the final analysis holds the trump card. It is not a Gospel of Revelation but a Gospel of common sense, for why would God command men to repent or yield to the overtures of the Holy Spirit if man did not, of his own, have freedom of will to do so?

In the Western Church the drift to Synergism was slower than in the East. At the Council of Orange (A.D. 529) it had been agreed that "God does not wait for man's decision."⁴ But at the Council of Trent (1545—63) the synergistic view was officially written into the theology of the Roman Catholic Church, it there being agreed that man's will is a decisive factor. Berkhof says: "In the days of the Reformation the monergism of the Reformers was opposed by the Roman Catholic Church with greater vehemence than any other doctrine."⁵ Indeed it may very well have been the major reason for the calling of the Council of Trent in the first place.

³ Luther: quoted by Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, St. Louis, Concordia Press, vol. I.

⁴ G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Divine Election*, translated by Hugo Beker, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1958, p. 31.

⁵ Berkhof, *Louis History of Christian Thought*, London, Banner of Truth Trust, 1975, p. 146.

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The Reformation was nothing less than the purging out of this synergistic tendency. And yet so strongly entrenched in human nature is its basic philosophy that within fifty years it was, as we have seen, once again embraced by the Lutheran community, and the terms of surrender were couched virtually in the words of Melancthon. Melancthon held that conversion is the result of the combined action of three causes: 1) the truth of God; 2) the Holy Spirit; and 3) the will of man. He made a *facultas* out of a mere *capacitas*, an active ability for grace out of a passive aptitude for the reception of it.⁶ And so after over five hundred pages of debate and discussion of the issue, the *Formula of Concord* finally confesses: "Towards this work [of grace] the will of the person who is to be converted does nothing but only *lets God work in him* until he is converted."⁷ [my emphasis]

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Meanwhile Arminius, assuming this active ability on the part of the unregenerate man, argued that the basis of Predestination to Election was God's foreknowledge of those who would exercise this capacity responsively. And by this heresy he left a similar community of misguided followers both in Holland and, even more seriously, in England and the New World, who, holding the synergistic view, formed a further major division of the Church of God. Methodism, and out of Methodism a number of other denominational bodies, cultivated the error which has largely inspired modern evangelistic methods. Such human techniques of persuasion are held to be in line with God's appointed method of reaching the unregenerate. Thus man usurps the convicting role of the Holy Spirit of God.

The consequences of these "persuasive techniques" in the free world are yet to become fully apparent. Already we see a great resurgence of religious enthusiasm, but if we look at the staying power of these thousands of decisions for the Lord it has to be admitted that the picture they often present a few months after "conversion" suggests there may be something seriously amiss with the method of evangelism, if not perhaps even more seriously with the theology which has inspired the method.

Karl Barth in a small volume entitled *God in Action*, sometimes referred to as his "Little Dogmatics," elaborates on this issue. To him Monergism is the keystone to any stand by the Church against the secular authority because it places the outcome of events squarely in the hands of God. As soon as we begin to say "God *and*," man becomes increasingly important as the decision maker and God decreasingly so. In due time God is reduced almost to the position of assistant or even bystander. The battle becomes not the Lord's but man's. When the world comes in like a flood to overwhelm the Church as Hitler's

⁶ Melancthon: Augustus Strong, *Systematic Theology*, Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, Judson Press, 1907, p. 816.

⁷ *Book of Concord*, p. 539.

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world did, man finds himself alone in his weakness and no longer able to meet the challenge. In 1934 Barth said to an English audience:⁸

I'm sure that everyone of you is horrified [i.e., by what was happening to the Christian Church in Germany, and says in his heart I thank God that I am not a German Christian]. I assure you that it will be the end of your road, too. It has its beginning with "Christian life" and ends in paganism. For, if you once admit not only God but I also, and if your heart is with the latter i;½ and friends, that's where you have it—there's no stopping it. ...

Let me warn you now. If you start with God and ... you are opening the doors to every demon. And the charge which I raise against you, I lay before you in the words of Anselm: *Tu non considerasti, quandi ponderis sit peccatum!* You have failed to consider the weight of sin. And that is the sin that man takes himself so very seriously.

This seemingly small concession to which Luther refers always has had the effect of opening the way to a flood of error that effectively neutralizes Paul's Gospel of salvation by faith without works. As W. G. T. Shedd observed:⁹

The position of partial ability or synergism comes to the same result with that of full ability [i.e., Pelagianism] so far as divine independence and sovereignty are concerned. For it is this decision of the sinner to contribute his quota, to do his part in the transaction, which conditions the result. It is indeed true, upon this theory, that if God does not assent, the act of faith is impossible. But it is equally true that if the sinner does not assist, the act of faith is impossible. Neither party alone and by himself can originate faith in Christ's atonement. God is as dependent in this respect as man.

G. C. Berkouwer wrote in a similar vein: "This theme of synthesis [between God's grace and man's power of decision] runs like a red thread through the history of the Doctrine of Election. It is the theme of harmony, of co-operation."¹⁰ And it is a poison, fatal to the Gospel. It is a heresy that slowly undermines all the implications of the truth of the Sovereign Grace of God. Warfield refers to it as,¹¹

⁸ Barth, Karl, *God in Action*, New York, Round Table Press, 1963, pp. 137f.

⁹ Shedd, W. G. T., *Dogmatic Theology*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1969 reprint, vol. II, p. 472.

¹⁰ Berkouwer, G. C., *Studies in Dogmatics: Divine Election*, translated by Hugo Beker, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1960, p. 29.

¹¹ Benjamin B. Warfield, *Calvin as a Theologian and Calvinism Today*, London, Evangelical Press, reprint of 1909 edition, pp. 16.

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... the evil leaven of synergism, by which God is robbed of his glory and man is encouraged to attribute to some power, some act, some initiative of his own, his participation in that salvation which has come to him from pure grace ... Any intrusion of any human merit, or act, or disposition, or power, as ground or cause or occasion, into the process of divine salvation—whether in the way of power to resist or ability to improve grace, or the employment of grace already received—is a breach with Calvin.

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And a breach with Calvin in this respect is a breach with Augustine and, more importantly, a breach with Paul. In short, the difference between a monergistic and a synergistic faith, between a *God only* and a *God and* Gospel, is nothing less than the difference between the Gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ on the one hand, and all other religious systems of belief, whether pagan or so-called Christian, on the other. There are basically only two alternatives. If man contributes any essential part towards his salvation, he effectively becomes his own saviour, even if that contribution takes no more concrete form than that of merely allowing God to act by non-resistance.

There is here a clear point of demarcation. It is all of God or it is no good news at all. If man is free to resist, God is not free to act, for He is bound by man's freedom. If God is to be free to act, man must be bound by the will of God. There can be nothing harmful in such a bondage, since perfect freedom by definition is perfect obedience to perfect law, and "the law of the Lord is perfect" (Psalm 19:7). In the perfect order which is yet to come there can never be any conflict of wills since God's will and man's will are to be one, and both are therefore to be entirely free. But in a fallen world, God's grace must be irresistible or man's will can remain forever opposed to God, and the will of the creature overrides the will of the Creator.

In truth there is no "Gospel" that is not entirely rooted in the Sovereignty of God's Grace in salvation, which is the sum and substance of Calvinism. And I venture to say that it must be not merely a three-point or a four-point Calvinism, but a five-point Calvinism. To depart from this is to surrender the whole by giving it a logical incoherence which makes it indefensible whether from Scripture or by reason. The crucial issue is the Sovereignty of God's Grace in the most absolute sense, a pure unabashed Monergism.

The only defense against Synergism is an unqualified Calvinism ascribing all the glory to God by insisting upon the total spiritual impotence of man, an Election based solely upon the good pleasure of God, an Atonement intended only for the elect though sufficient for all men, a grace that can neither be resisted nor earned, and a security for the believer that is as permanent as God Himself.

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If such a system creates some problems because of the limitations of our comprehension, the problems it creates are not nearly as serious as the problems of another kind created by the alternatives which in fact destroy the Gospel altogether by dishonouring the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ both as to its sufficiency and its efficacy.

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