

A REVIEW OF R. C. SPROUL'S *GRACE UNKNOWN:* *THE HEART OF REFORMED THEOLOGY*

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R. C. Sproul is the author of forty books, founder of Ligonier Ministries, and the daily radio teacher for the nationally broadcast “Renewing Your Mind.” He is also known as one of the easiest to follow communicators from the Reformed perspective.

Last year I had the opportunity to attend the Orlando Ligonier Conference at which Sproul spoke. There were approximately 5,000 in attendance—evidencing Sproul’s strong following.

I. THE AIM OF THIS BOOK

The dust jacket of the book gives its aim:

You’ve heard of Reformed theology, but you’re not certain what it is...

Who better to teach you about Reformed theology than R. C. Sproul? He has made theology understandable and exciting to ordinary people for decades, and he knows Reformed theology inside and out.

When R. C. speaks and writes, he often refers to Reformed theology. For years people have asked him what it is. *Grace Unknown* is his first book-length answer to this question.

Sproul does a fine job of explaining Reformed theology. He covers the five points of Calvinism (TULIP) in five fairly concise and readable chapters. However, he doesn’t start the book there. Rather, he begins with five chapters dealing with what he calls “Foundations of Reformed Theology.” The titles are instructive: Centered on God, Based on God’s Word Alone, Committed to Faith Alone, Devoted to Prophet, Priest, and King, and Nicknamed Covenant Theology.

It doesn’t appear from the book that Sproul was significantly concerned with proving that Reformed theology is derived from the

Scriptures. We do not find, for example, much in the way of exegesis in the book. Rather, Sproul is preaching to the choir here. His intended audience already believes in Reformed theology and is simply looking for a coherent and reasonably comprehensive explanation. This is not to say that Sproul ignores the Scriptures. He does cite Scripture often.

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However, due to the nature of the book, he cites men (especially Calvin, Luther, and Edwards on 33, 36, and 8 pages, respectively) and the councils of men (especially the Westminster Confession of Faith, with citations on 24 pages, by my count) much more frequently than he does Scripture.

I found that he cites Scripture on 59 of the 216 pages of the body of the book.¹ In a secular book that would be a high percentage. However, for a theology book to limit its mention or discussion of Scripture to 27% of the pages is rather startling. That is especially so when this is compared with books like *Absolutely Free!* by Zane Hodges (94%),² or *So Great Salvation* by Charles Ryrie (54%).³ The difference is marked.

II. WHAT SPROUL SAYS ABOUT THE FREE GRACE POSITION

While he never directly mentions our position, he does cite Zane Hodges on a few pages. There he makes it clear what he thinks of his, and our, theology.

According to Sproul the idea that regeneration precedes faith is absolutely central to the Christian gospel (pp. 179-96). Therefore, at

¹ I do not count places in which sources he is quoting cite Scripture. If those were added in, the total would increase slightly. What I counted were places where he quoted, discussed, or even merely referred to a text of Scripture.

² I found only 12 out of 203 pages in which Hodges failed to quote, discuss, or refer to Scripture. In fact, on most pages there were many references and many exegetical points made.

³ Scripture was cited on 84 of 154 pages, by my count.

one point in this discussion he mentions Hodges and his book *Absolutely Free!*.

After giving Hodges mild praise for saying that regeneration is a miraculous work of God, he asks,

The question is, however, *when* does this miracle take place? According to Hodges it occurs when the Word is received in faith. Faith precedes regeneration and is the necessary condition for it. This places Hodges squarely in the semi-Pelagian camp.⁴

I found this a rather extreme example of overstatement. Semi-Pelagianism is the view that eternal salvation requires both the work of God and man. People must turn from their sins and obey God in order to gain and keep salvation. A few pages later Sproul indicates as much:

Are there some who have genuine faith who do not endure to the end and are therefore not ultimately saved? The semi-Pelagian answers yes. Semi-Pelagianism teaches that a person may come to true, authentic, saving faith and fall away from that faith, losing his salvation.⁵

Thus Sproul appears to believe that Zane Hodges teaches that one can lose eternal salvation. How else could he say that he is “squarely in the semi-Pelagian camp”? If he believes that, he hasn’t even done a good job of skimming Hodges’s writings. If he doesn’t believe that, then he is guilty of grossly misstating the position of Zane Hodges.

And, it should be noted, Sproul is placing all who believe that faith precedes regeneration, and that includes nearly all of us in the Free Grace camp, under the semi-Pelagian banner. That is nearly a curse word in Reformed circles.

I was surprised that in his discussion of perseverance and eternal security Sproul failed to indicate our position. He said that there are three views as to what happens to professing believers who fall away from the faith. First, he says they may not have been saved in the first place (pp. 208-209). Second, he says that they may be genuinely saved and if so, they “will repent of their sin and be restored before they die” (p. 209). Third, he indicates a biblically impossible position, which he

⁴R.C. Sproul, *Grace Unknown: The Heart of Reformed Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 194.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 198.

again calls the semi-Pelagian position, that they were genuinely saved and lost their salvation (p. 209). Does he not know that there is a fourth position? Did he not read *Absolutely Free!* well enough to realize that we teach that genuine believers may fall away and yet remain eternally secure? That he doesn't even mention this position is an incredible mistake for a serious theologian!

III. WHAT SPROUL BELIEVES ABOUT FAITH AND ASSURANCE

A. FAITH DEFINED

Sproul does not mention or show any familiarity with the outstanding work, *Faith and Saving Faith*, by the late Reformed scholar Gordon Clark. That is a shame, for his discussion of faith suffers from lack of attention to the points made by Clark.

Sproul suggests that faith has three components: knowledge (*notitia*⁶), understanding (*assensus*), and trust that loves the object of trust (*fiducia*).⁷ Of course, trust is a synonym for faith. As Clark has shown, to say that trust is an element of faith is to say that faith is made up of faith!

Sproul states:

The presence of both *notitia* and *assensus* is still insufficient for justification. Even the devil has these elements. Satan is aware of the data of the gospel and is more certain of their truth than we are. Yet he hates and despises the truth of Christ. He will not rely on Christ or his righteousness because he is the enemy of Christ. The elements of *notitia* and *assensus* are necessary conditions for justification (we cannot be justified without them), but they are not sufficient conditions. A third element must be present before we possess the faith that justifies.⁸

Before going on to see what he says about *fiducia*, notice his logic. Satan has knowledge of the gospel and he assents to its truthfulness.

⁶ Sproul normally spells this *notitia* (pp. 71, 72 twice, 226). However, he also spells it *noticia* on one occasion (p. 71).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 69-72.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

Yet he is not regenerate. The conclusion demanded, it seems, is that more than knowledge and assent is needed to have eternal life.

Yet think this through a bit more. Did the Lord Jesus die for Satan and demons? Of course not. Thus even if they did whatever Sproul requires to have “the faith that justifies,” they still wouldn’t be justified. Justification is impossible for non-humans.

Notice that Sproul admits that Satan is more certain of the truth of the gospel than he himself is. He writes, “Satan is aware of the data of the gospel *and is more certain of their truth than we are*” (italics added). I’m not sure what he means here. Does he mean that we are not sure that the gospel is true? That is the impression given.

Luke 8:12 makes it clear that Satan believes the gospel. He knows that any living human being that comes to faith in Christ has eternal salvation that can never be lost. Hence he is busy snatching away the Word lest people believe it and are saved.

The problem with Satan is not lack of faith, or lack of the right kind of faith, as Sproul would say. His problem is that he rebelled against God and once he did, God set his eternal destiny once and for all. There is no changing of his condition, or the condition of the angels who fell with him.

How does this view stack up against the Gospel of John? Do we find more than knowledge and assent in the case of the woman at the well and the other Samaritans who came to faith in Christ (John 4)? Where is commitment indicated in the man born blind (John 9)? Or in the Lord’s simple statement to Martha (John 11:25-27)? John’s Gospel knows nothing of some third element of saving faith. Indeed the purpose statement of the book says that whoever believes *that* Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, has everlasting life. Clearly in John nothing more than understanding and acceptance (or assent) are required for eternal life. The same is true in the entire Bible (compare, for example, Gen 15:6 and Rom 4:1-8).

Here is what Sproul says about the supposed third element:

This [third] element is *fiducia*, a personal trust and reliance on Christ, and on him alone, for one’s justification. *Fiducia* also involves the affections. By the power of the Holy Spirit the believer sees, embraces, and acquiesces in the sweetness and loveliness of Christ. Saving faith loves the object of our faith, Jesus himself. This element is so crucial to the debate over justification. If a

sinner relies on his own works or on a combination of his righteousness and that of Christ, then he is not trusting in the gospel.⁹

This is remarkable. It amazes me how a number of Reformed theologians have expanded the meaning of *fiducia*. No longer is it merely trust in Christ. (Of course, even that would not be an element of faith, but merely a synonym for it.) Now it is trust that “also involves the affections.” That is a vague statement. How does one know when his affections have been sufficiently *involved* so as to show he has true saving faith and not the other kind, whatever it is?

If “by the power of the Holy Spirit the believer sees, embraces, and acquiesces in the sweetness and loveliness of Christ,” then how could the believer ever sin? If “saving faith loves the object of our faith, Jesus himself,” then would not sinlessness be true of all with saving faith? Surely sin is never an expression of love for Christ. The Lord Himself said, “If you love Me, keep My commandments” (John 14:15).

Of course, Sproul might counter that the believer’s life is merely characteristically loving and obedient. Thus temporary incidents of sin occur. However, keep in mind that Sproul is defining here what saving faith is. According to his theology, saving faith must be continuous to be genuine. If it ever ceases, then one proves he never truly believed in the first place. Thus under this reasoning if a Christian ever failed to see, embrace, or acquiesce in the sweetness and loveliness of Christ, would he not be proving that he never believed in the first place?

B. REGENERATION PRECEDES FAITH

As previously noted, Sproul calls all who believe that faith is a condition of regeneration *semi-Pelagians*.

He begins his chapter on the “I” in TULIP talking about this issue. He indicates that when John H. Gerstner was a college student many years ago, he was stunned when his professor, John Orr, wrote in large letters: REGENERATION PRECEDES FAITH. Gerstner thought Orr transposed the words *regeneration* and *faith*. “Once he heard his

⁹ Ibid., 72.

professor's cogent argument, Gerstner was convinced and his life was set on an entirely different course."¹⁰

I was saddened by this story. Imagine what John Gerstner might have accomplished for the Lord and His gospel if he had been in the Free Grace camp. If he had sat under the teaching of men like Charles Ryrie, Zane Hodges, and Howard Hendricks, he might well have become a powerful Free Grace spokesman. I'm not sure from this or other stories about him whether he once was in our camp or not. However, this anecdote makes it clear that Gerstner once believed that faith is a condition of the new birth.

Sproul goes on to say something even more startling. He says,

This tends to be something of a pattern for Calvinists. As Roger Nicole declared, "We are all born Pelagians." Conversion to Christ does not instantly cure us of our Pelagian tendencies...In the church we are widely exposed to Arminianism, which has had American evangelicalism in a stranglehold since the days of Charles Finney.¹¹

What is amazing is that this Reformed theologian believes that a person can at the moment of new birth believe in a works-salvation gospel. For that is the gospel of Pelagianism (or, Arminianism). Maybe that isn't so amazing after all. For in their view the key is perseverance. As long as someone comes to the right doctrines eventually, they were saved in the first place. In essence they, like Luther, hold to a linear view of eternal salvation.

Sproul cites the raising of Lazarus as an example of how a spiritually dead person must be born again before he can come to faith (pp. 184-87). Yet he fails to explain how a regenerate man, a believer, can be an example of how an unbeliever is regenerated. Would not Lazarus better illustrate how *believers* can become bound up and need God to deliver them from their bondage to sin? Did not the Lord say to believers, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32)?

According to Reformed thought it is heresy to suggest that an unregenerate person can respond in any way to God. Yet what do they do with the account of Cornelius in Acts 10? He was an unregenerate

¹⁰Ibid., 179-80.

¹¹Ibid., 180.

man. Yet God was moved by his prayers and alms to send an angel to him to give him a message. Cornelius heard the message and sent for Peter who told him what he needed to do to be saved.

And what of Acts 17:27? Hebrews 11:6?

Sproul presents the case as either Arminianism or Five-Point Calvinism. He scoffs at the idea of Four-Point Dispensational Calvinists (pp. 192-96). The uninformed reader who realizes that Arminianism is not correct is left with the impression that the only other option is Reformed theology. It seems to me that Sproul should do a better job of presenting the third option so that his readers at least have enough

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information upon which to base their beliefs. As mentioned above, his caricature of Hodges and other Free Grace proponents as semi-Pelagian is a gross misrepresentation.

C. ASSURANCE AND FAITH

Sproul devotes eight pages (pp. 199-206) to the doctrine of assurance of salvation. That is a fair amount of space in a book of this size attempting to discuss all aspects of theology. Unfortunately, his book is as confusing on this subject as is the Westminster Confession of Faith.

After a brief quote from the Westminster Confession, his first sentence speaks volumes. How a person introduces a subject is vitally important. Here is how Sproul starts his discussion of assurance:

The [Westminster] confession acknowledges that there is such a thing as false assurance.¹²

That is quite telling. His primary concern is not how a believer can have assurance. Rather, his main concern is to warn believers that any assurance they may have may well not be real assurance at all. Not only that, but should we not also be concerned that he quotes from the Westminster Confession and not the Bible to establish the grounds for the discussion?

¹²Ibid., 199.

He says that false assurance comes from two difficulties: 1) “from an incorrect view of salvation,” or 2) [from] “an incorrect assumption about one’s personal faith” (p. 199). Unfortunately, he doesn’t explain what he means by either of these statements. In light of the entire book and his other writings, he would consider the Free Grace view of salvation to be an incorrect view that leads to false assurance. And his view of “one’s personal faith” is that faith is unknowable on merely a mental basis. To know if one truly believes he must look at the works which he is doing. Those works give clues as to whether his faith is genuine or not. Since the Free Grace position adopts what he would call “an incorrect assumption about one’s personal faith,” he would conclude that any assurance we have is false.

He goes on to suggest that all elect people are saved. Thus, he says if we can figure out if we are elect or not, we can know if we are saved (p. 200).

The problem here is that he has things backwards. Assurance comes from knowing we are saved. Once we know we are saved, we know we are elect. There is no sign of election other than that you believe the gospel and hence know yourself to be regenerate. However, since Reformed theology looks for proofs of election, and since they look at one’s works to find this, they end up with no certainty.

Sproul’s next major point is chilling to me:

One thing, however, is certain. There is clearly a link between our assurance and our sanctification.¹³

The reason I find this chilling is because if assurance is based even in part on our progressive sanctification, then absolute certainty is impossible.

In spite of this, twice in the next few sentences Sproul says that one can be “certain of his salvation” (pp. 200-201). This leads him to a section of the Confession where it speaks of certainty and infallible assurance. After saying this, however, he goes on to say that if one obtains certainty, it can and probably will be shaken and lost:

Our faith and assurance tend to be frail and fragile. Assurance can be easily disrupted and rudely shaken. It can be intermittent. It is

¹³ *Ibid.*, 200.

particularly vulnerable to sin...When we commit it, we ask ourselves, "How can a true Christian do such things."¹⁴

Sproul claims to believe that a person can be certain he is saved. Yet when this claim is examined carefully, it doesn't make sense.

If sin destroys assurance, as he says, then every time we are aware of sin, we wonder if we are truly saved. Since all believers sin many times each day, how could anyone ever be sure?

Let's say you got in a minor spat with your wife or kids before leaving for work. There went your assurance. Now say you got it back after prayer and confession. But then you said something wrong at work before lunch and lost it again. And so it went all day. You doubted your salvation time and again. How many days would it take like that before you concluded that it is a fantasy to speak of certainty? Such "certainty" is not certainty since all believers sin (1 John 1:9, 10).

In Reformed thought true believers persevere and false professors don't. Both believe the same things *in their heads*. The way to find out which category you fall in is by seeing if you persevere. Of course, you can't be sure you will persevere until you've died. So the best you can do is look at your works and see if they look like the types of works that the Spirit does. If they do, then it is quite possible you will persevere and prove you are saved. Of course, even false professors produce temporary good works that look like the real thing. So any assurance we have is at best tentative.

Indeed, after discussing "Assurance and Sanctification," Sproul considers "Perseverance in Salvation." Note well the first sentence here: "We have seen the close link between the assurance of salvation and perseverance in the Christian life" (p. 207). He then continues, "We must also remember, however, that they are not to be identified with or equated with each other. They are to be distinguished, but not separated. *Assurance is our subjective confidence* in both our present salvation and, by extension, our future salvation."

Actually the Westminster Confession gives both objective and subjective grounds for assurance. But Sproul is right (*assurance is our subjective confidence*). The bottom line in Reformed theology is that the subjective elements (the works we do and the inner witness of the Holy Spirit) are the real grounds of assurance. The objective promises

¹⁴Ibid., 204-205.

of God only apply to me if Christ died for me, and He only died for me if I am elect and I can only know if I am elect by subjective means.

What about professing believers who fall away? Are they saved or unsaved? “The first possibility is that their profession was not genuine in the first place” (p. 208). “The second possible explanation of those who make a profession of faith, give outward evidence of conversion, and then repudiate the faith, is that they are true believers who have fallen into serious and radical apostasy, but who will repent of their sin and be restored before they die. If they persist in apostasy until death, then theirs is a full and final fall from grace, which is evidence that they were not genuine believers in the first place” (p. 209).

In other words, if a believer falls away and dies in that state, he never was saved in the first place. Since no believer can be sure he will not fall away—even Paul wasn’t sure (1 Cor 9:24-27)—thus no believer can be certain he is genuinely saved until he dies.

Despite his few comments on certainty, full assurance for Sproul is not certainty. The best a believer can hope for is a high degree of confidence. However, even that is wishful thinking, since every sin produces doubt in his mind.

IV. WHAT SPROUL SAYS ON OTHER MATTERS

A. THE ATONEMENT

The title of Sproul’s chapter on the atonement is “Christ’s Purposeful Atonement” (p. 163). While all systems of theology agree that Christ had a purpose in dying on the cross, when Reformed theology speaks of purposeful atonement, these are code words for *limited atonement*. That is, Christ didn’t die for everyone. He only died for the elect. Sproul makes this clear from the first page of this chapter and throughout the entire chapter.

Dispensationalists and all who believe in unlimited atonement are called *semi-Pelagians* at the start and end of this chapter (pp. 165, 177). Sproul feels that the unlimited atonement position is a works-salvation theology. He reasons in this

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way. *Most will not be saved. But if Christ died for all, then all will be saved unless there is some condition they must meet. If people must believe in Christ in order to be saved, then they must do something. Since faith includes commitment and thus obedience, faith itself is a work. This would make salvation a human work, rather than a gift of God.* Thus all who believe in unlimited atonement believe in works salvation according to Sproul!

Sproul is either unaware of or withholds from the reader the view of Dr. Chafer and others that the atonement made all people “savable.” The Lamb of God took away the sins of the world (John 1:29) in the sense that no one’s sins represent a barrier to him being saved. He is now free to gain eternal life by faith in Christ. Of course, the one who dies in unbelief dies in his sins (John 8:24). Taking away sins is not the same as the granting of eternal life.

That is the point of the cross. Jesus has made the whole world savable. Our sins no longer represent a barrier to us gaining eternal life. However, prior to the new birth, we are indeed spiritually dead. Only by believing in Christ can we be born again.

Unlimited atonement does not mean universalism. Since most reject the free offer of eternal life, most will die in their sins. Still, they will not be able to claim they were unable to gain life. The cross means that all are savable.

Before moving on, I thought Sproul should have discussed Calvin’s view on this point. Scholars are divided on whether Calvin himself believed in limited or unlimited atonement. Sproul fails to mention this. In fact, he doesn’t mention Calvin even once in this chapter.¹⁵ Statements seeming to prove both positions can be found in Calvin’s *Institutes*. The best study I’ve seen shows that Calvin indeed held to unlimited atonement. Since Sproul is defending what are typically called *the five points of Calvinism*, it would seem essential that he point out that modern Calvinism is not necessarily in sync with Calvin on this point.

¹⁵This is especially surprising in view of the people he does mention. He cites the views of J. I. Packer, John Owen (two lengthy quotes), and the Westminster Confession.

B. PREDESTINATION AND ELECTION (DOUBLE PREDESTINATION)

The author is remarkably candid on this highly controversial point. Even many five-point Calvinists reject what is called *double predestination*. Double predestination is the teaching that God arbitrarily elected some to eternal life (predestination #1) and chose all the rest to eternal damnation (predestination #2). According to this view, it isn't merely that God *passed over* the non-elect with the result that they experience the consequence of their own unbelief. Rather, God actually chose people to spend eternity in hell. These people, according to Sproul's form of Reformed theology, never had a chance to believe since they were constitutionally unable to believe.

Sproul puts it this way:

Some advocates of predestination argue for *single* predestination. They maintain that, though some are predestined to election, no one is predestined to damnation or reprobation. God chooses some whom he will definitely save, but leaves open the opportunity for salvation for the rest. God makes sure that some people are saved by providing special helps, but the rest of mankind still has an opportunity to be saved. They can somehow *become* elect by responding positively to the gospel.

This view is based more on sentiment than on logic or exegesis. It is manifestly obvious that if some people are elect and some are not elect, then predestination has two sides to it. It is not enough to speak of Jacob; we also consider Esau. Unless predestination is universal, either to universal election or universal reprobation, it must be double in some sense.¹⁶

How is God fair in condemning people who were predestined never to come to faith? That question doesn't bother Sproul. God is God and anything He does must be just, for He is just. That is true. However, it is *manifestly obvious*, to use Sproul's term, that punishing someone eternally for failing to do something they were incapable of doing is unfair. Surely that should drive double predestinarians back to the Scriptures to see if they don't teach something else.

¹⁶Sproul, *Grace Unknown*, 157.

C. TOTAL DEPRAVITY (HUMAN INABILITY)

Chapter 6 is entitled “Humanity’s Radical Corruption.” We do not find here some of the harshness on this subject found in works of other Reformed theologians. For example, MacArthur illustrated what he thinks it means to be dead in trespasses and sins with the story of a woman whose baby died. The woman was crazy with grief, and even kept talking to the baby and touching it, evidently hoping she could revive him. But there was no response. Here is MacArthur’s conclusion:

Spiritual death is exactly like that. Unregenerate sinners have no life by which they can respond to spiritual stimuli. No amount of love, beseeching, or spiritual truth can summon a response. People apart from God are the ungrateful dead, spiritual zombies, death-walkers, unable even to understand the gravity of their situation. They are lifeless. They may go through the motions of life, but they do not possess it. They are dead even while they live (cf. 1 Tim 5:6).¹⁷

Sproul ends up in the same place. But he does so without an insensitive illustration, and without being as in-your-face as MacArthur. He indicates that the unregenerate do in some sense have free wills (pp. 130-34). However, until God regenerates a person, he can only exercise his free will to do sin and never to seek God or respond to Him. He says, “The spiritually dead must first be made alive (‘quicken’) by the Holy Spirit before they have any desire for God” (p. 136).

What should we conclude about Cornelius in Acts 10? Before he was born again his prayers went up to God. He received a message from God from an angel. And he understood the message and obeyed it! Only after he had sought God was he born again. Sproul, however, does not discuss Cornelius or other examples which contradict his position (e.g., Lydia, Acts 16).

D. PERSEVERANCE

For some reason both Arminianism and Five-Point Calvinism teach that only those who persevere in faith and good works will make it into the kingdom. Despite the seeming differences between those two

¹⁷ John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1993), 65.

theological systems, their views on perseverance show that they are indeed quite similar at their core.

As previously mentioned, in Reformed thought assurance of salvation is conditioned upon perseverance. Sproul makes this point repeatedly in Chapter 10 (see especially pp. 207-209). In fact, this chapter which is on perseverance begins with an extended section on assurance of salvation.

When I went to seminary I thought that the fifth point of Calvinism was all about eternal security. I thought it meant that all who come to faith are eternally secure regardless of whether they live for Christ or not. I quickly learned that is not the Reformed position. Sproul brings this out clearly time and again. In his first sentences in a section entitled “Perseverance and Preservation,” he notes, “The perseverance of the saints could more accurately be called the preservation of the saints... The believer does not persevere through the power of his unaided will. God’s preserving grace makes our perseverance both possible and actual.”¹⁸

Here is his reasoning. *God promises that no regenerate person will fall away. Regeneration guarantees transformation that lasts. Thus while it is true that all believers are eternally secure, this security is never true of a person who falls away from the Lord and dies in that state. Such a person proves he was never saved in the first place. Eternal security is only true because perseverance/preservation is guaranteed.*

I found it rather remarkable that Sproul indicated that “as part of the process of our sanctification, perseverance is a synergistic work. This means it is a cooperative effort between God and us.”¹⁹ At first glance, this statement seems fine. Do not Free Grace people believe that perseverance is a synergistic work? Of course we do. And do we not believe that perseverance is a part of sanctification? The answer is yes, but the problem is that for Sproul and Reformed theology, justification flows into sanctification in such a way that the two cannot be separated. If a person fails to persevere, he proves he was never justified in the first place. Thus, perseverance is required to get into the kingdom. Of course, we do not believe that and so we have no problem saying that perseverance is a synergistic work. However,

¹⁸ Sproul, *Grace Unknown*, 210.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 212.

since Sproul believes perseverance *is* required to get into the kingdom, he should be totally unwilling to say that perseverance is a synergistic work. Sproul is here implying what Gerstner made explicitly clear in his book, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*.²⁰

A theology that vehemently denies any sense of synergism in justification ends up essentially contradicting itself because of its view of perseverance in sanctification.

E. SOLA SCRIPTURA

JOTGES readers would agree with what Sproul says in this section (pp. 41-57). He defends inspiration, infallibility and inerrancy, and the authority of Scripture. We would say a hearty “Amen” to his remarks here.

He also expresses concern that individuals should not use their

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freedom to interpret the Bible to condone a sloppy handling of the Word of God:

The right of private interpretation means that every Christian has the right to read and interpret the Bible for himself or herself. This does not give an individual the right to

misinterpret or distort the Bible. With the right of private interpretation comes the responsibility of handling the Bible carefully and accurately. Nor does this right suggest that teachers, commentaries, and so forth are unnecessary or unhelpful. God has not gifted teachers for the church in vain.²¹

While we certainly find fault with some of the interpretations of Sproul and other Reformed theologians, we are quite happy that they stand firmly for the authority and inerrancy of the Word of God.

²⁰ John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, Publishers, 1991). See especially pp. 209-50. Note this statement, “Thus, good works may be said to be a condition for obtaining salvation in that they inevitably accompany genuine faith” (p. 210).

²¹ Sproul, *Grace Unknown*, 55.

V. CONCLUSION

Sproul selected the title *Grace Unknown* because he feels, rightly I believe, that most Evangelicals fail to grasp the wonder of God's amazing grace.

According to Reformed theology, only those who persevere in the faith are truly saved. And no one can be sure he will persevere until he dies. Hence absolute certainty that one is eternally secure is impossible prior to death.

Thus the title has meaning on another level as well. It is not merely the author's audience that needs a better grasp of God's grace. The very theology the author is advancing leads the author himself to be unaware of the grace of God.

Grace Unknown is an ironic title for this book. Grace is indeed unknown to those who adopt the traditional understanding of five-point Calvinism.²²

Imagine a person who believes it is impossible to be sure you are saved going out to witness to others. What does he hope to accomplish? He hopes to lead his listeners to adopt his views. Thus if his listeners accept what he is saying, then they too will be convinced that it is impossible prior to death to be sure that they are eternally secure.

That is the position of Reformed theology. They hope to convince all in Christendom that we might not really be saved. They wish to get us to focus our attention on our works. Fear of hell is a desirable motivation in this system of theology.

The gospel debate is no academic exercise conducted in a vacuum. The issues here are a matter of life and death. Only one gospel is truly good news.

I recommend this book as a helpful introduction to Reformed theology. Read it with your eyes open and you will come away with a profound sadness. Well-meaning leaders have lost that which is the heart of the good news—assurance of eternal salvation. *Grace Unknown* is indeed *The Heart of Reformed Theology*.

²²It should be noted that there are some five-point Calvinists who are Free Grace advocates. I have met a few of them. That is why I speak here of the "traditional understanding of five-point Calvinism." Those five-pointers who are in the Free Grace camp hold to a very loose understanding of perseverance (some works, some time, but they may not be recognizable to us and the person may die in rebellion to God).

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