

# The Mighty Antithesis: Sin and Grace

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One cannot approach so vast a subject nor one so central to genuine Christian life and not expect to encounter error and deception. Grace is a concept one can meditate upon for years and still not plumb its depths. Also Satan, who leaves no stone unturned in his ill-advised and ill-fated rebellion to be something like the Most High God (Isa. 14:14, etc.) , must exert all possible influence upon men to cause them to negligently miss and fall short of this grace. (Heb. 12:15) Thus, not surprisingly, church history is replete with episodes where men sought to find and maintain the divine perspective of this vast and central truth.

## A Twentieth Century Deviation

A.W. Tozer wrote about the imbalance we now call hyper-grace in the 1950s. He wrote:

Fundamental Christianity in our times is deeply influenced by that ancient enemy of righteousness, antinomianism. The creed of the antinomian is easily stated: We are saved by faith alone; works have no place in salvation; conduct is works, and is therefore of no importance. What we *do* cannot matter as long as we believe rightly. The divorce between creed and conduct is absolute and final. The question of sin is settled by the Cross; conduct is outside the circle of faith and cannot come between the believer and God. Such, in brief, is the teaching of the antinomian. And so fully has it permeated the Fundamental element in modern Christianity that it is accepted by the religious masses as the very truth of God.

Antinomianism is the doctrine of grace carried by uncorrected logic to the point of absurdity. It takes the teaching of justification by faith and twists it into deformity. It plagued the Apostle Paul in the early Church and called out some of his most picturesque denunciations. When the question is asked, "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound" he answers *no* with that terrific argument in the sixth chapter of Romans. (Rom. 6:1-2)

The advocates of antinomianism in our times deserve our respect for at least one thing: their motive is good. Their error springs from their very eagerness to magnify grace and exalt the freedom of the gospel. They start right, but allow themselves to be carried beyond what is written by a slavish adherence to undisciplined logic. It is always dangerous to isolate a truth and then press it to its limit without regard to other truths. It is not the teaching of the Scriptures that grace makes us free to do evil. Rather, it sets us free to do good. Between these two conceptions of grace there is a great gulf fixed. It may be stated as an axiom of the Christian system that whatever makes sin permissible is a foe of God and an enemy of the souls of men.

Right after the first World War there broke out an epidemic of popular evangelism with the emphasis upon what was called the "positive" gospel. The catch-words were "believe," "program," "vision." The outlook was wholly objective. Men fulminated against duty, commandments and what they called scornfully "a decalogue of don'ts." They talked about a "big," "lovely" Jesus who had come to help us poor but well-meaning sinners to get the victory. Christ

was presented as a powerful but not too particular Answerer of Prayer. The message was so presented as to encourage a loaves-and-fishes attitude toward Christ. That part of the New Testament which acts as an incentive toward holy living was carefully edited out. It was said to be “negative” and was not tolerated. Thousands sought help who had no desire to leave all and follow the Lord. The will of God was interpreted as “Come and get it.” Christ thus became a useful convenience, but His indisputable claim to Lordship over the believer was tacitly cancelled out.

Much of this is now history. The economic depression of the thirties helped to end it by making the huge meetings which propagated it unprofitable. But its evil fruits remain. The stream of gospel thought had been fouled, and its waters are still muddy.” (A.W. Tozer, *Paths to Power*, p. 41-42)

What Tozer here calls “antinomianism” (which the version he speaks of is not the only variation available by which one can live opposed to God’s laws, ways, commandments and requirements), however, is by no means an invention of the twentieth century. Portions of it, particularly the error that “conduct is outside the circle of faith and cannot come between the believer and God (*ibid*, p. 40), comes straight from Gnostic notions of the separated-ness of good and evil.

The overall question, indeed what has been rightly termed “the mighty antithesis” of sin and grace (Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Vol. III, Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity*, p. 787) is certainly no new conflict. When Tozer says, “It may be stated as an axiom of the Christian system that whatever makes sin permissible is a foe of God and an enemy of the souls of men” (*Paths to Power*, p. 40), he is only rightly echoing the sentiments of ideas that were decided at the Council of Orange in 529 A.D. which decreed “It is by no means our faith, that any have been predestined by God to sin, but rather: if there are people who believe so vile a thing, we condemn them with utter abhorrence.” (Schaff, *III*, p. 869) The similarities – and the differences – are not accidental for the conclusions reached by Tozer and the Council of Orange stem from virtually the same questions.

### **A Fifth Century Error**

The Council of Orange was convened to resolve issues surrounding what came to be called “semi-Pelagianism” and resulted in the “orthodox” (another term for *majority* opinion) position that came to be known as “semi-Augustinianism.” And it is here that we begin to see the principal opponents in the first recorded conflict over “the mighty antithesis” of sin and grace – Pelagius and Augustine. This conflict, because of its uncanny similarities to the modern hyper-grace errors, is worthy of some consideration because, if for no other reason, we will see how other believers before us have wrestled with these same questions. It is a complex and convoluted conflict, however – as is to be expected since it centers on this “mighty antithesis” upon which our entire salvation hinges and revolves – and effort is made here to provide only the details which bear upon the modern error of hyper-grace. (Those who wish to explore the entire Pelagian-Augustinian conflict and all its derivatives should begin with church history books like Bruce Shelley’s *Church History in Plain Language*, p. 145-146 and Schaff, *III*, pp. 783-870) The key caution here is to remember that while Pelagius was certainly in error, Augustine is not always entirely correct and it is only to be hoped that in the examining of their positions, we may draw nearer to the whole counsel of God for our day and age. But at least until Christ returns, it

will remain a truth that any discussion of sin and grace is going to cover ground at least touched upon by the conflict between Pelagius and Augustine.

“Pelagius was a simple monk, born about the middle of the fourth century in Britain, the extremity of the then civilized world. He was a man of clear intellect, mild disposition, learned culture, and spotless character; even Augustine, with all his abhorrence of his doctrines, repeatedly speaks respectfully of the man. He studied the Greek theology, especially that of the Antiochan school [which generally advocated a soberer grammatical and historical exegesis and made a sharper distinction between the human and divine elements in the Scriptures], and early showed great zeal for the improvement of himself and of the world. But his morality was not so much the rich, deep life of faith, as it was the external legalism, the ascetic self-discipline and self-righteousness of monkery.” (Schaff, *III*, p. 790)

It is here we find the first similarity and distinction – Pelagius’ error grew in the soil of the “external legalism, the ascetic self-discipline and self-righteousness” of the monastery. The hyper-grace error seems to grow strongest and best in the hearts of those who reject the external legalism, sporadic and inconsistent self-discipline and “superior to all else” self-righteousness that abounds in “church” circles. In both instances, the legalism is put forward as the right way to follow Christ and God because of the lack of exposure to the true spiritual life of Christ. The distinction is found in that Pelagians embraced the legalistic requirements as the way of salvation and hyper-gracists dismiss all requirements as mere legalism and form. Yet the fact that they both stem from similar roots is significant.

“Augustine (354-430) had already in his *Confessions*, in the year 400, ten years before the commencement of the Pelagian controversy, set forth his deep and rich experiences of human sin and divine grace. This classical autobiography, which every theological student should read, is of universal application, and in it every Christian may bewail his own wanderings, despair of himself, throw himself unconditionally into the arms of God, and lay hold upon unmerited grace. Augustine had in his own life passed through all the earlier stages of the history of the church, and had overcome in theory and in practice the heresy of Manicheanism, before its opposite, Pelagianism, appeared. By his theological refutation of this latter heresy, and by his clear development of the Biblical anthropology, he has won the noblest and most lasting renown. As in the events recorded in his *Confessions* he gives views of the evangelical doctrines of sin and of grace, so in the doctrines of his anti-Pelagian writings he sets forth his personal experience. He teaches nothing which he has not felt. In him the philosopher and the living Christian are everywhere fused. His loftiest metaphysical speculation passes unconsciously into adoration. The living aroma of personal experience imparts to his views a double interest, and an irresistible attraction for all earnest minds.” (Schaff, *III*, p. 816)

It is in Augustine’s experience that we find the depth of his understanding of sin and grace. Jesus presented a story that ended with a question for Simon the Pharisee. Jesus said,

“There was a certain creditor who had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing with which to repay, he freely forgave them both. Tell Me, therefore, which of them will love him more?” The right answer, “The one whom he forgave more” is given and Jesus then compares the actions of the “sinner” woman (who washes Jesus’ feet with her hair and anointed His feet with fragrant oil) with those of Simon, His host for lunch (who apparently thought that giving Jesus a place at his table and some food to eat was more than enough). Jesus then concludes, “Therefore I say to you, her sins which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little.” (Lk. 7:37-47) Those who receive much grace are those who generally have deeper experiences in God. This would certainly seem to be the case when we compare Augustine and Pelagius.

### **A Clash of Two Systems**

The idea that the Augustinian system clashes with the Pelagian system should tell us immediately what the underlying problem is. Men are following systematic ideas (“theology”) and not necessarily Christ. This is most apparent in Pelagius whose systematic “theology” causes him to depart from clearly revealed Scriptural truths. Augustine, in this instance, does adhere more closely to divine truths yet it will be his views on predestination (which becomes attached to this conflict) that enables Calvin’s views and it is Augustine’s views on the use of civil force to punish heretics that is used to justify the use of execution and torture in the Spanish Inquisition. Other things besides good fruit come out of Augustinianism.

Life in Christ is simply not a system – it is personally interacting with and following the Most High God of the universe, something we are allowed and invited to do because His Son paid all the penalties for our sins and His Spirit was poured out upon all flesh so that any man could obediently take up his own cross and obediently follow after Christ. This *is* the grace of God extended toward sinful man and man has the option to take it or leave it primarily because God allows him that option. “Theology,” however, allows men under the power of their own opinions and ability to reason, as well as those influenced by demonic ideas, to redefine, according to their own preferences, just who and what “God” is and how “He” is to be followed. Where theology (the study of God) adheres to divinely revealed truth and brings one into more accurate awareness of the realities of God, it is a good thing. But when it replaces God with a “God” re-created according to the vain imaginations of men or, worse, according to some deception spawned by the demonic, it is a horrible, abominable thing indeed!

As we examine the major characteristics of these two systems and compare them to both the hyper-grace error and truths about God’s grace, let us always keep before us the Person of Christ and allow Him, by His Spirit of truth, to guide and shape our thinking.

“The Pelagian controversy turns upon the mighty antithesis of sin and grace. It embraces the whole cycle of doctrine respecting the ethical and religious relation of man to God, and includes, therefore, the doctrines of human freedom, of the primitive state, of the fall, of regeneration and conversion, of the eternal purpose of redemption, and of the nature and operation of the grace of God.” (Schaff, *III*, p. 787)

This is the scope of the Pelagian-Augustinian conflict even as it is the same scope of the question of hyper-grace versus grace. Pelagianism, as does hyper-grace, widens “the idea of grace to indefiniteness” (Schaff, *III*, p. 844) but simultaneously reduces it to a theological system

that is superficial and therefore hazardous, even lethal, to the eternal souls of men. In one sense it is almost inconceivable that hyper-grace found a way to make grace larger than it actually is. But this is precisely what it does – it takes grace too far into the realms of sin, not to overcome sin but rather to remain ignorant of sin, on one hand, while it excuses, condones and even encourages certain sins, on the other hand. In seeking to magnify grace beyond boundaries God set for it, grace becomes hyper-grace, a license to practice sin and lawlessness – both the antinomianism (against all law) that Tozer referred to above and the lawlessness that recognizes no outside source as a standard for life and conduct but rather relies on self-approved ideas of right and wrong. This latter kind of lawlessness is summed up in the description of the Israelites in the time of the judges: “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” (Jdgs. 21:25) Because Christ is not truly and fully the King of the hyper-gracists, they have fallen into the common malady of churchianity today – choosing which brand and flavor of “Christianity” they themselves prefer and Christ is effectively excluded from any real place of Headship and Lordship and the practitioners of this kind of lawlessness are ultimately excluded from His kingdom. (Mt. 7:23)

### **Of God and Men**

Philip Schaff gives fourteen aspects of the Pelagian-Augustinian conflict that wonderfully illuminate the multiple and manifold aspects of “the mighty antithesis” of sin and grace. These aspects are displayed at length in the hopes that our understanding and vocabulary will be improved as it is evident that the hyper-grace versus discussion will go on for some time. It is also hoped that those who have partaken of hyper-grace in ignorance will be enabled to repent and be returned to a safe place within the boundaries which God has ordained for His grace.

1) “It comes at last to the question whether redemption is chiefly a work of God or of man.” (Schaff, *III*, p. 787)

Both Augustine and hyper-grace will say that the redemption of man is *wholly* a work of the grace of God. And if the hyper-grace error had more depth of understanding of God’s grace and could articulate their position to coincide more with Augustine, they would be much nearer the truth than they are with their blanket, superficial, virtual slogans, that it’s “all by grace.”

Augustine’s views on grace are, as was already stated, firmly grounded in his profound conversion experience and in his recognition of who unworthy he was to receive such blessing. Thus, unlike Pelagius whose experience was limited almost entirely to that of the monastery, Augustine knew, from personal experience, just how powerful grace had to be to so completely overpower sin and corruption as deep-seated as his own. Secondly, Augustine had a deeply profound understanding of God’s presence in His creation, particularly those whose spirits were revived and rejuvenated in Christ. Since he thus approaches grace from the perspectives of both the receiver and the Giver, he has a much better grasp on the concept than does Pelagius whose reasoning is further corrupted by other false premises he held regarding the nature of man and of the fall.

This is not to say that Augustine’s views are perfect – his views are tainted by misconceptions of what “the church” is but that misconception does not protrude much into this controversy. One scholar sums up Augustine’s views on grace by saying, “Those to whom God does not send His grace are lost. Nor can any man be sure, even if he now enjoys God’s grace, that he will be saved. Only those to whom God gives the added grace of perseverance, that is,

who have divine aid to the end of life, will be redeemed.” (Williston Walker, as quoted by Bruce Shelley, *Plain Language*, p. 146) Many hyper-gracists will object to this summation on the issue of “once-saved always-saved,” “eternal security” or, as Augustine termed it, “irresistible grace,” which many mistakenly take to mean “absolute predestination.” Indeed, the antithesis of sin and grace involves so many aspects of life in Christ that articulating the truth in contrast to the hyper-grace error becomes almost overwhelming. This gives hyper-grace, like the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ denial of the Deity of Christ, much room for confusion and muddled thinking in contrast to the pure light of the Scriptures as opened up by the Spirit of truth (see Lk. 24:45, Acts 16:14) and rightly divided by the diligent worker approved by God. (2 Tim. 2:15)

Hyper-grace, moreover, does not propel its people toward greater works of righteousness and deeper levels of holy consecration to God and the attainment of His will – these are condemned as “self-effort” and is said to be offensive to God and Christ, who finished all things at the cross. (Jn. 19:30, see however, Rev. 21:6 where Christ again says, “It is finished!”) Hyper-grace, by condemning all that they call “self-effort” – which includes all effort, diligence, etc. – effectively divorces the believer from the grace by which, as Paul said, they might labor abundantly (1 Cor. 15:10), a labor that Paul called co-laboring with God. (1 Cor. 3:9) Hyper-grace’s definition of “self-effort” simply does not line up with the light of the Scriptures. (see 2 Pet. 1:5-7, Heb. 6:11-12, Tit. 1:16)

The real answer to the question of whether redemption is a work of God or man is “yes.” This is more than the natural mind can grasp and the hyper-gracist who has rejected the mind of Christ on this matter will not be able to receive this truth. This answer of “yes,” of course, must be qualified in that:

1) God is always the Initiator and Giver, all because of His own loving, gracious nature and through no merit on man’s part. It can also be added that even man’s “right” to choose or repel God’s grace that leads to salvation is a condition that exists only because God so willed it. As but one example, God commands all men everywhere to repent – “No exceptions anywhere...a permanent command of perpetual force.” (A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament, Vol. III*, p. 290, on Acts 17:30) If God commands all men to repent and desires that “none should perish” (2 Pet. 3:9), what illogic or insanity or demonically-induced blindness we must use to deny that men will be held to account for disobeying God’s command and preventing His grace from working in their lives! If God is to do *everything*, then the command for all men to repent and change their minds and lives is the biggest farce ever presented to mankind! And,

2) man is always the *receiver* of grace and, only by cooperation with the power of God, is the *keeper* of his salvation. (compare Jude 21, 24) If a man demonstrates by his conduct, which always speaks louder than words, that the gift he has received from God is of no real importance to him, by what insanity can we believe that God will keep him under grace or allow the man to keep so precious a gift? (see Mt. 25:29-30, Heb. 12:14-17) It is a truth that God loves and receives the repentant sinner as he is – yet it is an equal truth that He loves the sinner too much to leave him in that condition! The hyper-gracist, who believes himself already to be a recipient of God’s grace, sees no need to seek further

change, no need for further repentance for violations of God's laws and ways, and thus fails to connect with God's true grace that changes him from darkness into light. (Col. 1:13, Eph. 5:3-11, etc.) It is not a question of earning one's salvation – it is a question of using God's grace and power to keep it.

### **Spirit and Soul**

2) “It comes at last to the question...whether man needs to be born anew, or merely improved.” (Schaff, *III*, p. 787)

Jesus said to Nicodemus, “You must be born again,” even telling him not to be surprised by that fact. (Jn. 3:7) Even hyper-grace recognizes the need for new birth (though at times and from its various teachers, that sometimes comes across as mere lip service to the concept) but most often it, as does so much of churchianity today, fails to accurately chart and illuminate the *path* that leads to eternal life. At best, hyper-grace recognizes that there is a gate but fails to lead its people down the road that leads to life (Mt. 7:14) primarily because that road entails the effort of picking up one's own cross and following after the One who has already walked this road. (Lk. 14:27)

Pelagius apparently missed or dismissed the need for the new birth because he thought men could simply be improved. He failed to see how deeply sin has impacted man and thus failed to appreciate and apprehend the even-deeper remedy God has provided. Again, hyper-grace accomplishes a truly Herculean task by making grace bigger than it truly is, but does so, in part, by diminishing what and how far-reaching sin is.

3) “The soul of the Pelagian system is human freedom; the soul of the Augustinian is of divine grace.” (Schaff, *III*, p. 787)

In a strange twist, hyper-grace claims to rely on divine grace that takes one into supposed liberty but, in reality, it causes one to practice subtle sins, whereas Pelagianism relies on human effort to practice legalism that takes one into supposed righteousness. It is perhaps in this superficial difference that we can begin to see their deeper similarities. Whereas Pelagianism starts in the religious flesh of man and “refines” it to greater heights of outward piety, hyper-grace starts or returns to the religious flesh of man and “delivers” him from “legalism” into a realm of “liberty” that is in reality antinomianism (anti-godliness) or lawlessness (whatever is right in one's own eyes) and sins like self-centeredness and covetousness (especially justifying a carnal, worldly, wealthy lifestyle) are promoted.

Hyper-grace teachers will claim to be against sin, even vehemently, completely, aggressively and irrevocably against it. But their definition of sin turns out to be vague, indefinite things like “evil” or “a defeated and destructive lifestyle.” The Bible, however, is much more precise. (see Prov. 8:13, 1 Jn. 3:4-8, Rom. 3:23, 14:23, Jas. 4:17, Gal. 5:19-21) Any teaching of grace that does not expose all of the flesh's tendencies toward what God calls sin is, at best, a short-sighted derivative of the truth. A shallow perception of sin brought on by failing or refusing to seek out what God says is sin, both in the law and in the New Testament (see Rom. 7:7, etc.) is primarily what produces hyper-grace's inability to accurately define true grace.

This twisted corruption of truth *is* the soul of hyper-grace.

4) “Pelagius starts from the natural man, and works up, by his own exertions, to righteousness and holiness. Augustine despairs of the moral sufficiency of man, and derives the new life and all power for good from the creative grace of God.” (Schaff, *III*, p. 787-788)

Here hyper-grace will stand vehemently – and rightly – with Augustine and denounce the natural man’s ability to exert his way to righteousness and holiness. But because hyper-grace is built on convoluted corruptions of truth and not on the solid rock of Jesus Christ, hyper-grace “rescues” its followers from God’s requirements of godliness and good works (2 Pet. 1:5-7, Jas. 2:22, Eph. 2:10, etc.) and “delivers” its followers back to the natural fallen man so that he or she can comfortably be as worldly as everyone else in their culture. It is to be noted that hyper-grace enjoys its most popularity in affluent and wealthy cultures.

5) “The [Pelagian] system proceeds from the liberty of choice to legalistic piety; the [Augustinian] from the bondage of sin to the evangelical liberty of the children of God.” (Schaff, *III*, p. 788)

Hyper-grace will use the vocabulary of Augustine and the New Testament but, in reality and like much of churchianity today, will lead its followers, not into evangelical liberty so as to be good like God and Jesus, but into lawlessness (what is right in one’s own eyes) that enables one to use “liberty” to indulge the more subtly sinful desires of the flesh, especially our materialistic and religious flesh.(see Gal. 5:13) To be certain, gross and obvious sins are condemned but self-centeredness and covetousness (renamed “prosperity” and labeled a “blessing” from God) and dissensions (Greek *dichostasia* [1370]), sectarianism, schisms and heresies (in its original meaning of “party by choice” – see *hairesis* [139] – Gal. 5:20), the predominate sins of churchianity today, are practiced, condoned and encouraged. True liberty, the ability to break free from the bondages of evil, wickedness and sin in all its forms so as to be, in practice, good and godly, is thus transformed into a license for sin – again, primarily because God’s holiness and law is utterly disdained and sin, to the hyper-gracist, is much less than what it is in the Bible.

6) “To the [Pelagian] Christ is merely a teacher and example, and grace an external auxiliary to the development of the native powers of man; to the [Augustinian] He is also Priest and King, and grace a creative principle, which begets, nourishes, and consummates a new life.” (Schaff, *III*, p. 788)

Here hyper-grace does not line up with either and, as such, could be termed inside-out Pelagianism or reversed Augustinianism. That is, Christ, to the hyper-gracist, is no mere teacher or example – and while Christ is perhaps called Priest and King (or Lord – see Lk. 6:46), Christ’s place, as is true in much of churchianity, is nominal and not literal. To the hyper-gracist, grace is in reality (though not in his “theology”) “an external auxiliary” (a get out of personal responsibility before God “theology”) that purports to be that “unmerited favor” from God who closes His eyes to all conduct (see however Mt. 16:27, 2 Cor. 5:10) and the hyper-gracist enjoys a miraculous “redefinition” so that he can no claim to be “the righteousness of God” while living in the manner that most appeals to his materialistic and religious flesh. Thus holiness is



dismissed as any kind of real requirement (see however Heb. 12:14) and “liberty” is used as a justification for lawlessness, what is right in one’s own eyes.

### **Lip Service**

7) “The [Pelagian] makes regeneration and conversion a gradual process of the strengthening and perfecting of human virtue; the [Augustinian] makes it a complete transformation, in which the old disappears and all becomes new.” (Schaff, *III*, p. 788)

Here Augustine will be the hyper-gracist’s spokesman, at least as far as these statements go. However, the hyper-gracist’s transformation into a “new creature” is cosmetic and not something done in real time by real people living real lives. The old disappears because Christ performed some kind of magic trick at the cross and made all of a “believer’s” sins – past, present and future – disappear from God’s view. “All He sees is the blood of Christ” is a favorite line – but not even a proof text is offered for this one. The new creation is something that is declared “in faith” no matter how worldly or self-focused one’s lifestyle is. Jesus’ statement, “Whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple” (Lk. 14:27), is thus rendered idiotic and imbecilic. After all, anyone who “believes” is Christ’s disciple and all things were “finished” at Christ’s cross. The truth is, however, that salvation is a gift from God that must be worked out with fear and trembling (Phlp. 2:12) and worked with (Mt. 25:20-21) or one is cast out and disinherited. (Mt. 25:30, Heb. 12:17)

8) “The [Pelagian] loves to admire the dignity and strength of man; the [Augustinian] loses itself in adoration of the glory and omnipotence of God.” (Schaff, *III*, p. 788)

Here hyper-grace will stand solidly in Augustine’s camp – as even Tozer acknowledges. The hyper-gracist is to be commended for seeking to magnify God’s grace and Christian liberty. The aspects of true grace indeed cause one to extol the glory and omnipotence of God. But hyper-grace, when it propels its followers into areas of sin and flesh, actually re-deposits its people back into enmity with God. Again the primary cause is superficial knowledge or even outright opposition to things God calls sin – and, as the parable of the two sons teaches (Mt. 21:28-31), no amount of lip service will ever accomplish the will of the Father.

But it is sad that though hyper-grace begins with the desire to follow and worship God, because it leads into too large a “liberty,” the liberty to indulge the flesh, it ultimately leads one back into the realms of man’s accomplishments and his own strength. In the end, such a false “gospel” will not produce eternal salvation.

9) “The [Pelagian] flatters natural pride, the other is a gospel for penitent publicans and sinners.” (Schaff, *III*, p. 788)

Because the hyper-gracist fails to see the depths of sin and what wretched things we have become as a result of the fall, they exhibit a false, natural pride in the innate goodness of man – even as their “theology” at times will deny this – and thus they stand in no need for a Savior to bring them into righteousness. Here hyper-grace produces people who, if they could be brutally honest about their beliefs, say, “I don’t need to practice God’s righteousness because I’ve already

received His grace.” As a result of such distorted thinking, the hyper-gracist falls short of God’s grace and returns to the realms of sin and flesh and misses true salvation.

While hyper-grace would seem to appeal to many personality types, it appears to have the greatest attraction among those who have been exposed to the legalisms of the “church,” either in their “pastors,” “leaders” or their parents. Though there is no statistics available to conclusively prove this, experience with hyper-gracists and their writings would at least suggest the theory that the attraction to hyper-grace is rooted in the abuses these hyper-gracists have witnessed or experienced. But one cannot reject one form of sin in order to embrace another kind of sin and hope to be genuine followers of Christ and God. This is only to revert to one’s natural pride and fleshly resources. Those hyper-gracists who were once among “the penitent tax-collectors and sinners” know in their hearts they cannot return to their former ways of sin (also see Eph. 4:17-19, etc.) but because they’ve found a teacher or “theological” system that allows them to pursue wealth or religiosity without “guilt,” they return to a different kind of sins of the flesh.

Peter wrote, “While [the false teachers] promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption...if, after [any] have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in [the pollutions] and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning. For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the *holy* commandment delivered to them.” (2 Pet. 2:19-21) The hyper-gracist who has truly been set free from the corruptions of this world through a spiritual encounter with Christ needs to consider how serious a matter this is. If their beginning condition was a sinner bound for hell, what worse thing could befall them if they reject God’s holy commands and re-submit themselves to worldliness? The only thing worse than eternity in hell would be an eternity in hell knowing that one had once had his hands on the way to escape hell! That would certainly cause one to weep, wail and gnash his teeth. (Mt. 22:13, etc.)

10) “Pelagianism begins with self-exaltation and ends with the sense of self-deception and impotency. Augustinianism casts man first into the dust of humiliation and despair, in order to lift him on the wings of grace to supernatural strength, and leads him through the hell of self-knowledge up to the heaven of the knowledge of God.” (Schaff, *III*, p. 788)

Hyper-grace begins with an over-exaltation of grace and therefore ends in the same place as Pelagianism, self-deception and spiritual impotency. Hyper-grace refuses to cast man into the dust of humiliation and despair or take him through the hell of self-knowledge and thus is unable to lift anyone to supernatural strength or to genuine knowledge of God. Quite simply, hyper-grace is a distortion of the gospel and thus a different gospel. (see Gal. 1:7-9) The mere fact that hyper-grace, like many other errors and heresies, utilizes the vocabulary of the New Testament does not make it truth. Rather it makes it all the more dangerous to the souls of men.

### **Reason or Revelation**

11) “The Pelagian system is clear, sober, and intelligible, but superficial; the Augustinian sounds the depths of knowledge and experience, and renders reverential homage to mystery.” (Schaff, *III*, p. 788)

The hyper-grace system is also clear, sober, intelligent and superficial – as a result it, like Pelagianism, is incorrect and departs from truth. Hyper-grace, because it is superficial, has no depths of knowledge or experience to draw from and refuses to set aside its own “theology” and receive revelation from God. The one who would be set free from the excesses and insufficiencies of hyper-grace so as to return to the divinely-set parameters of God’s grace will be required to surrender all his knowledge and “theology” back to God and allow Him to sort through all of it and render His judgment upon each item. Some of those items will be returned as truth, some as error and some as a mixture of the two. But only in this way can a hyper-gracist return to the Lord and the way of salvation and truth.

12) “The [Pelagian] is grounded upon the philosophy of common sense, which is indispensable for ordinary life, but has no perception of divine things; the [Augustinian] is grounded upon the philosophy of the regenerate reason, which breaks through the limits of nature, and penetrates the depths of divine revelation.” (Schaff, *III*, p. 788)

Hyper-faith is the product of human reason, as Tozer said, “uncorrected logic [taken] to the point of absurdity.” (*Paths to Power*, p. 40) As such it leaves behind even common sense but this remains unnoticed because of the ignorance or rejection of God’s requirements for holiness and righteousness. Because hyper-grace takes its followers out from under grace and back into the realms of the flesh, the depths of divine revelation are not available to the hyper-gracist. As Peter said, “You therefore, beloved, since you know beforehand [that some will twist and distort the Scriptures], beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked – but grow in the grace *and knowledge* of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (2 Pet. 3:17-18)

13) “The [Pelagian] starts with the proposition: *Intellect precedes faith*; the [Augustinian] with the opposite maxim: *Faith precedes intellect*.” (Schaff, *III*, p. 788)

Let it be clearly recognized that neither side of this conflict says that one *excludes* the other, but rather one *precedes* the other. Any intellect (of the flesh) that excludes genuine faith, as surely as any faith that excludes genuine knowledge (of Christ, etc.) is a fraud and counterfeit. But intellect is obviously the premier attribute used by the hyper-gracist, but it is an intellect unrenewed by the Spirit (Rom. 12:2) as is evidenced by the failure to attain to the rightly, whole counsel of God. But the hyper-gracist becomes so intellectual about the things of God that even common sense is violated and abandoned. Faith is a gift from God (Eph. 2:8-9) but truth is something we must be led into. (Jn. 16:13) Christ brought grace *and* truth (Jn. 1:17) – hyper-grace opts for grace but misses the mark where truth is concerned. Sadly for the hyper-gracist, Christ is not offering anyone any either/or choices where these two attributes are concerned.

14) “Both make use of the Scriptures; the [Pelagian], however, conforming them to reason, the [Augustinian] subjecting reason to them.” (Schaff, *III*, p. 788)

Here hyper-grace has deposited itself into solidarity with the Pelagians. Hyper-gracists, similarly to the Jehovah's Witness, and because the question of sin and grace is so large, are able to jump from verse to verse and never come to grips with how their "theological" system is built on a flawed foundation and built with distorted and twisted truths. Hyper-gracists, feeling that they have escaped legalism, are convinced that their new-found "liberty" is God-given and the demonic and the flesh are quite happy to diligently provide feelings to confirm this misconception as "fact." But the Word of God remains unchanged for all that – only those who *do* the will of God will enter the kingdom of God. (Mt. 7:21)

### **Ongoing Conflict**

The conflict between truth and error is only slightly younger than the human race. Those who wish to be on the side of truth, the side of Jesus Christ, need to present themselves to Him and be led by His Spirit of truth into all truth. Those who bypass this only way to life are those who reject Christ and present themselves unguarded to deceiving spirits who seek to destroy their soul for all of eternity. Those who are willing to abandon and reject others who belong to Christ, as so many hyper-gracists do to those who will not agree to their distortions of the truth, are only evidencing that they have come under the power of demonic spirits. The spirit of truth can be discerned from the spirit of error in the lives of those who listen to God and His servants from those who refuse to listen to anyone but their own intellect and their own favorite ear-scratching "spiritual gurus." (1 Jn. 4:6)

“At the third ecumenical council in Ephesus, A.D. 431 (the year after Augustine's death), Pelagius was put in the same category with Nestorius. And indeed there is a certain affinity between them: both favor an abstract separation of the divine and the human, [Nestorius] in the person of Christ, [Pelagius] in the work of conversion, forbidding all organic unity of life.” (Schaff, *III*, p. 801)

Though there is no council to condemn hyper-grace, those who would press on to eternal life must recognize that God is one and there is no other God except Him. This was and is God's foremost important law. (Mk. 12:29) Jesus' high priestly prayer thus stands paramount: “That they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us...” (Jn. 17:21) This unity or oneness is the work of God – the redeeming of sinful men back to God so that they might display the righteous, holy and unified nature of God. Only His grace, and not some demonically-spawned hyper-grace, can accomplish this.

Let he who has ears hear what the Spirit says to His people as this debate and conflict for truth's triumph over error continues – fifteen hundred years later.

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