

'Pride and Faith' in Berkouwer's *Studies in Dogmatics*

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[p.50]

'The great theologians from Paul and Augustine to G. C. Berkouwer and Karl Barth ... have been able to explain what the faith does not mean as well as what it means.'¹ This is a short study in the writings of one of those great theologians named here by D. G. Bloesch. G. C. Berkouwer, Emeritus Professor of Systematic Theology at the Free University of Amsterdam has been described as one of 'the best theological writers of our day', 'one of the genuinely significant leaders of Christian thought in our day'. His *Studies in Dogmatics*, running—in English translation—to thirteen volumes, has been described as 'one of the most ambitious undertakings in contemporary theology'. Berkouwer has been commended for his 'complete familiarity with all the currents in contemporary theology'. Concerning Berkouwer, it has been said that 'the theological student who neglects him is not wise'.² In this study, we will explore the meaning of faith by considering both what faith is and what it is not. This will be done by tracing the contrasting themes of pride and faith in Berkouwer's *Studies in Dogmatics*. To assist us in structuring our thinking about pride and faith, we will consider these themes under three major headings: man's need of salvation; God's provision of salvation; the believer's experience of salvation.

Man's need of salvation

The story of man begins with God the Creator. Man has been 'created ... in the image of God' (Gn. 1:27). Berkouwer discusses the doctrine of man in his book, *Man: The Image of God*. The story of man is not only a story of creation in God's image. It is also the story of man's fall into sin. At the heart of man's fall, there is the sin of pride. This is highlighted in the words of 'the serpent' in Gen. 3:5—'For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil'. Man's fall into sin leads to a 'perversion' of his relationship with God. His whole life is shaped by 'a perverted self-knowledge... which arise(s) from pride'. Alluding to the picture of the Pharisees presented in the Gospels and the description of the Jew given by Paul in his Letter to the Romans, Berkouwer offers a penetrating analysis of man's sinful pride:

We can hardly say that the Pharisees had an accurate 'knowledge' of man when they pointed to the sins (the *real* sins) of publicans and sinners. This judgment, which separated knowledge of man from self-knowledge, was as nothing in God's eyes. The Jew did not have a better understanding

¹ D. G. Bloesch, *The Ground of Certainty*, (Grand Rapids, 1971), 61.

² These words of commendation from E. T. Ramsdell and Dr. Dale Moody are found on the rear dust cover of Berkouwer's *Studies in Dogmatics*.

[p.51]

because he was able to judge the heathen. In the sphere of abstract morality this could possibly be said, but this is not Biblical morality—O man, who judgest others!

Berkouwer stresses that the biblical doctrine of sin leaves no room for self-centred pride. He emphasizes that '(e)vil in man is radical, so much so that it cannot be overcome by human power'. Maintaining that man does 'not have the power to begin by himself any change in spiritual things', Berkouwer stresses that 'there is no limit or boundary within human nature beyond which we can find some last human reserve untouched by sin. He points out that, in '(t)he Gospels', "being a sinner" means 'being lost'—'There is no way for man to escape the condition of being lost ... The lost can only be sought and found'. The biblical teaching concerning being lost serves to enhance its teaching concerning the greatness of God's salvation. Emphasizing that 'the jubilation of salvation corresponds to this very real condition of lostness', Berkouwer points out that, in Scripture, 'there is never any mention of a relativizing of sin' since '(a)ny such relativizing of sin would also automatically relativize the unspeakably wonderful nature of salvation'.

God's provision of salvation

The Bible speaks of sin. It also speaks of salvation. The gospel is directed toward 'the restoration of the image of God'. In this connection, Berkouwer cites Eph. 4:24 and Col. 3:10 which speak of 'the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness', 'the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator'. Concerning the relationship between creation and salvation, Berkouwer writes,

the restoration and renewal of the image will throw light upon the meaning and content of the original creation of man in the image of God.³

When we consider man's creation in the light of his salvation, we find ourselves underlining the contrast between pride and faith. In his book, *Divine Election*, Berkouwer stresses that the Bible story is a 'history of salvation (which) does away with any personal glory'. This history of salvation reaches its high point in Jesus Christ. Here, we have the low point for human pride, since 'in Christ' we have 'the exclusion of all human merit'. This is the point which Paul makes in 1 Cor 1:31 and 2 Cor. 10:17—'Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord'. We are to 'glory in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh' (Phil. 3:3). The gospel presents us with a challenge. We are to turn from our sinful pride and put our faith in Christ. Human pride does not surrender easily to our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. The gospel's call for faith can be resisted. Such resistance to Christ has drastic effects:

The gospel does not leave unchanged the person who does not listen and remains disobedient... unbelief can lead only to progressive hardening of the heart.

³ *Man: The Image of God*, (Grand Rapids, 1962), 103, 21, 27, 122, 131-2, 135, 143, 144, 87-9.

There is no way out of the bondage of sinful human pride, other than the way of faith in Jesus Christ. Berkouwer makes this point well:

Hardening can never be broken by man in his own power. There is no other therapy that can bring about a change except the divine healing in Christ and the superior power of the Spirit.⁴

Central to Berkouwer's exposition of salvation are his books, *The Person of Christ* and *The Work of Christ*. In both of these books, Berkouwer draws the contrast between pride and faith. In *The Person of Christ*—commenting on Mt. 16:16-17 (Peter's confession, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God', and Jesus' reply: '...flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven')—he writes:

the confession of the church touching Jesus Christ can never be a knowledge such that, with it, the church can elevate itself above the world. It is precisely within the church that people will have to remind themselves that this knowledge is a gift and a miracle which did not arise out of flesh and blood.⁵

In *The Work of Christ*, discussing the theme—reconciliation—Berkouwer writes,

it is the marvel of the work of the Holy Spirit that those who really respond to the proclamation of reconciliation claim no merit whatsoever for that response, but rather find the essence of their joy in God, who reconciled us unto himself.⁶

The change which takes place when we trust Jesus Christ is not only a change in our view of Christ. Through Christ, we look differently at both God's creation and our own circumstances. In his books, *General Revelation* and *The Providence of God*, Berkouwer explores the Christian's view of creation and circumstances. Since our view of creation and circumstances is bound up with our faith in Christ, there can be no room for any self-centred pride. Emphasizing that our experience of salvation changes our view of creation, Berkouwer writes:

man in and by the salvation of God is delivered from the tenacity of the egocentric and commences to sing of the glory of God. It is this salvation that opens doors and windows toward God's handiwork.⁷

In his exposition of *The Providence of God*, Berkouwer stresses that we are not concerned here with any mere human optimism in which man himself can take pride:

in the doctrine of Providence we have a specific Christian confession exclusively possible through faith in Jesus Christ. This faith is no general, vague notion of Providence. It has a concrete focus: 'If God is for us, who is against us? He that spared not his own Son, but

⁴ *Divine Election*, (Grand Rapids, 1960), 72, 143, 149, 249-50, 252.

⁵ *The Person of Christ*, (Grand Rapids, 1954), 14.

⁶ *The Work of Christ*, (Grand Rapids, 1965), 294.

⁷ *General Revelation*, (Grand Rapids, 1955), 131.

delivered him up for us all, how shall he not also with him freely give us all things?' (Rom. 8:31, 32).

Citing an earlier Professor of Systematic Theology at the Free University of Amsterdam, Herman Bavinck,

[p.52]

Berkouwer emphasizes the centrality of the cross in the doctrine of providence:

'In the cross', writes Bavinck, 'the Christian has seen the special Providence of God. He has, in forgiving and regenerating grace, experienced Providence in his heart. From this new, positive experience in his own life, he looks out over his entire existence and over the whole world, and sees there the leading of God's fatherly hand.'⁸

The believer's experience of salvation

Central to Berkeuwer's exposition of Christian experience are three books which might be called a kind of trilogy—*Faith and Justification*, *Faith and Sanctification*, and *Faith and Perseverance*. These titles emphasize the importance of faith in the theology of Berkouwer. From beginning to end, the Christian life is a life of faith. In each of these books, Berkouwer stresses that true faith in Jesus Christ is in direct contrast to the sinful pride of man by which he glories in himself rather than in the Lord.

Commenting on the meaning of justification by faith, Berkouwer writes, 'Everything is really said in an unobtrusive phrase, *in Christ*.' On the subject of *Faith and Justification*, he continues,

faith... is not added as a second, independent ingredient which makes its own contribution to justification in Christ... faith does nothing but accept, or come to rest in the sovereignty of His benefit ... we are not acceptable to God because of the worthiness of our faith. Grace is exclusively and totally God's.

Citing John Calvin, Berkouwer describes the nature of faith thus: 'faith looks away from itself to Christ'. With this understanding of faith, Berkouwer offers a helpful analysis of the doctrine of *sola fide* (by faith alone) and *sola gratia* (by grace alone): '*Sola fide* and *sola gratia* ... mean the same thing.' In these doctrines, by faith alone and by grace alone, God is glorified and man is humbled. On the final page of *Faith and Justification*, Berkouwer issues a warning against man's sinful pride. It is a warning which is grounded in the gospel doctrines of salvation: by faith alone and by grace alone—'let the sound of *sola fide*—*sola gratia* ring in the life of the Church. Let it be a warning against the pride of the treacherous heart.'⁹

⁸ *The Providence of God*, (Grand Rapids, 1952), 45, 47, 41.

⁹ *Faith and Justification*, (Grand Rapids, 1954), 43, 175, 44, 201.

These doctrines of salvation—by faith alone and by grace alone—also lie at the heart of Berkouwer's exposition of *Faith and Sanctification*. He stresses that 'in the New Testament all admonition is grounded in and proceeds from the mercy of God'. When the mercy of God is magnified, the pride of man is brought low—'the Scriptures preach humility: the only suitable response to the mercy of God.' How is man able to walk in the way of humility? It is the work of the Holy Spirit: 'he spirit alone could perform the miracle of making man walk on the road of sanctity without a sense of his own worth.' How long is man to walk in the way of humility? The believer's life-long experience is to be a walk in humility; 'This humility is not to be sloughed off as believers advance to new levels but to be preserved as long as grace communicates itself.' This call to humility brings with it a strong warning against human pride:

if anything is clear in the message of Scripture, it is that in sanctification there is never, under any circumstances, any room for self-pride or self-praise.¹⁰

This emphasis on humility also comes out strongly in Berkouwer's volume on *Sin*, where he maintains that '(i)n the mystery of the Spirit there is no greater gift than this gift of humility'. Concerning the importance of humility, he writes, 'it is identified with the gift of conversion itself since "(o)nly those who are humble can escape the judgment of which the Gospel speaks: He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts" (Luke 1:51)'. Berkouwer speaks of humility in connection with 'the mystery of the Spirit' since it is only through the power of the Holy Spirit that sinful man can be led into and kept on the way of humility. Concerning this ministry of the Holy Spirit, Berkouwer writes, 'In reproving and rebuking, in comforting and counselling, the Holy Spirit maintains a Christian in *humility*.'¹¹ If we are not to walk in the way of sinful pride, we must learn to walk in the way of humble faith. In this, the Holy Spirit is our Teacher.

Berkouwer's strong emphasis on the grace of God, with its warning against man's sinful pride, is maintained in the third part of the trilogy, *Faith and Perseverance*. Here, he stresses that we are not concerned with 'perseverance ... by one's own power'. Rather, we must direct attention to 'the persevering grace and power of God... the faithfulness of God'. In maintaining this emphasis on divine grace, Berkouwer insists that '(t)he grace of God is never the cause for glorying in one's own power' and that '(p)erseverance is always opposed to false self-confidence.' There is, in Berkouwer's trilogy on the Christian life, an echo of

Calvin's *Institution* which never tires of repeating the warning against every attempt at gaining assurance apart from Christ and His cross.¹²

The fact that Berkouwer has written this trilogy on justification, sanctification and perseverance should not lead us to suppose that he is concerned only with personal faith and has nothing to say about the corporate aspects of Christian faith. In his book, *The Church*, he gives attention to the relationship between the individual believer and the fellowship of God's people. Berkouwer

¹⁰ *Faith and Sanctification*, (Grand Rapids, 1952), 25, 125, 78, 117.

¹¹ *Sin*, (Grand Rapids, 1871), 228-9.

¹² *Faith and Perseverance*, (Grand Rapids, 1958), 228-9.

stresses that in 'God's saving reconciling action (t)he individual does not disappear'. Instead, 'he is liberated from individualization and solitariness in order to have a place in this new fellowship.' In the purpose of God, both the individual believer and the fellowship of the Lord's people have their important place:

Every individual need receives his undivided attention; yet, at the same time, ways are opened by which the individual receives a place in a human fellowship, ending all individualism.¹³

In his understanding of the relationship between the believer and the church, there is a warning against both individualistic pride and ecclesiastical pride. The

[p.53]

individual believer dares not stand apart from the church because it is not all that it should be. The church dares not conceive of itself as an impersonal organizational or institution which can run roughshod over its individual members.

Consideration of the believer's place within the church leads us on to *The Sacraments* of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Here, we are called away from our sinful pride. Concerning baptism, Berkouwer writes, 'The fundamental fact about baptism will always be its involvement with the death of Christ.' Developing this idea further in connection with the meaning of baptism, Berkouwer makes an important point:

The prevenient aspect of the grace of God lies not in the temporal priority of the acts of God in baptism in comparison with the conscious acceptance of the divine promise, but in the temporal priority of the cross of Christ with respect to the baptized person, whether child or adult.

A particular form of baptism, whether believers baptism or infant baptism, must not become such a source of doctrinal or denominational pride that we lose contact with the only legitimate boastings: 'God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Gal. 6:14). In his exposition of the meaning of the Lord's Supper, Berkouwer comments helpfully on the phrase 'worthy partakers'.

They are those who confess their sins in self-abhorrence, humiliation, faith in God's promises, and gratefulness of heart. This is the 'worthiness' that belongs to the Lord's Supper. It is not at all meritorious in nature, but is in complete harmony with what is signified and sealed in the Lord's Supper. It is a worthiness that coincides with a confession of 'unworthiness' and with trust in the salvation of God.¹⁴

This insightful explanation of what it means to worthily partake of the Lord's Supper presents a holy and yet loving rebuke to man's spiritual pride, whatever form it may take. There is a rebuke

¹³ *The Church*, (Grand Rapids, 1976), 77.

¹⁴ *The Sacraments*, (Grand Rapids, 1969), 118, 176, 256-7.

for those who, while speaking of their own unworthiness, proudly refuse to receive—by faith—the salvation which God, in love, offers to them in Christ. There is a rebuke also for those who take the love of God for granted, coming to the Lord's Table as a matter of mere religious ritual.

The celebration of the Lord's Supper directs our attention toward the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ—'For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' (1 Cor. 11:26). This is an oft-repeated reminder to us that the life of faith is a life that is directed toward the future. In his book, *The Return of Christ*, Berkouwer emphasizes that we must approach the future with a living faith and not with proud complacency. Challenging the teaching which moves directly from the love of God to the notion that all will be saved, he writes: 'it is extremely dangerous to think and talk about "the love of God" and what follows from it outside of the gospel.' The way of living faith is quite different from a proud complacency which simply assumes that all will be saved. Here, Berkouwer refers to 'the question addressed to Jesus... "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" '. He points out that 'Jesus' answer seems so noncommittal, so evasive'. Concerning Jesus' answer: 'Strive to enter by the narrow door (Luke 13:23f.)', Berkouwer comments, 'this evasiveness is only apparent', adding this insightful remark:

This is the answer to this question ... this question has been answered, once for all time.¹⁵

In all our theological study, there is one thing we must never forget. Whenever we bring our questions to God, he gives his answers, but they are not answers which bolster our proud complacency. They are answers which call us to faith, a living faith, a growing faith, a faith which brings glory to God.

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¹⁵ *The Return of Christ*, (Grand Rapids, 1972), 422-3.