

16) Humanity, Part 4

In part 1 of our theological topic: Humanity, we focussed on our created essence as humans to love as we are loved. In part 2 we focussed on the reality of how things go wrong in our world and in our lives. The traditional/biblical word for this is sin. In Part 3 we began to focus more specifically on the Christian life with God above, beside and within us powering us for living love in all its dimensions despite the challenges and struggles. We dug into the meaning of grace and the movement of the Holy Spirit. We also reflected on some important qualities of the Spirit-filled life such as gratitude, humility, generosity, the importance of faith and hope to support love, and finally, peace.

In this part 4, we will dig into some deeper questions: What role do human freedom, free-will and choice play in the Christian life when we are dependent on divine grace and the Holy Spirit to empower and transform us? Also, how do we think of growth and maturity in the Christian life when we continue to struggle with sin (anti-love feelings and behaviours)?

1) During the Protestant Reformation 500 years ago in Europe, there was a debate about how the Holy Spirit works within Christians. Do Christians continue to wrestle between the experience of God's grace and the fruits of love active in their lives on the one hand, and the reality of sin, discouragement and struggle on the other? Or are Christians supposed to progress so that sin is less and less a factor in their lives as they are growing in love (the traditional word for this progress is: sanctification)?

Martin Luther was a man who knew inner torment and struggle. And even as he accomplished so much as a pioneer reformer with his life under threat all the time, he struggled with depression and inner torment throughout his life. The victory of love and the assurance that he was loved and embraced eternally no matter what, was something he needed to experience afresh on a regular basis. John Calvin, on the other hand, believed that progress in the Christian life had to be an overcoming of sorts so that one's struggles were less and less a reality. And yet, as Calvin suffered hardships throughout his life (his health and the loss of loved ones, as well as colleagues and friends killed in the reformation struggle), his personal journals and prayers evince moments of deep struggle and the search for basic assurance of love in search of inner peace overcoming bitterness of spirit.

I must say, personally, I'm much more in the Luther camp and I empathize with Calvin the vulnerable human. I'd love to be past the struggle, to reflect invulnerability in my loving and assurance in my faith at all times. And yet, the experience of discouragement, moral failings and the prayerful search for resurrection in my spirit are a regular part of my Christian life seasonally and sometimes daily. What about you?

2) Another related and important debate in Christianity happened much earlier (4th century) and the key figures here were a church leader named Augustine and another leader named Pelagius. Pelagius believed in free-will when it came to the moral and spiritual life. There was no excuse for sin or struggle and everyone was equally responsible and accountable for their own choices. Augustine, on the other hand, believed that a person can be caught by powerful forces of addiction, compulsion and despair about one's life and worth for any number of reasons psychological, chemical or mysterious. Without the grace and mercy of God and the power of the Holy Spirit one was powerless to rise up and choose freely to embrace love and live it.

Augustine also shared many of his own struggles openly, inviting the condemnation of Pelagius who found it shameful that a leader of the church should evince such struggle. But for Augustine, the more he struggled the more it brought him to his knees in humble gratitude for the grace, mercy and Spirit of God meeting him and raising him up daily, through every situation, conflict and struggle. The power of sin and darkness is great and without God's counter power moving in and through us, we are weak. But this is not easy to accept for many of us. It's hard to confess vulnerability and weakness, and yet, how genuine is compassion in us if we do not recognize our own weakness and need for divine grace and the Spirit all too often?

Reformers like Luther and Calvin totally sided with Augustine, as do I. Without the grace, mercy and Holy Spirit of God I would not make it through my struggles so that love can shine in my life again and again. Freedom and choice are important and essential. But unless we are empowered by the Spirit, we cannot make good choices and truly be free. What do you think?