

Tullian Tchividjian's Emphasis on Grace Is Antinomian

Written by Tim Black
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On Facebook a friend asked for my response to Tullian Tchividjian's emphasis on our need for unconditional grace in justification and sanctification as he expressed it in an interview at <http://jonathanmerritt.religionnews.com/2013/10/02/tullian-tchividjian/>. I responded,

God's grace is prior to believers' obedience, because God is 100% sovereign (Eph. 2:8, 9—even faith is a gift). This is fundamental to the biblical doctrine of salvation, and must be emphasized, as it is in Reformed theology. But Reformed theology also rightly emphasizes the complementary biblical teaching that believers' obedience to God's law must flow from God's grace through faith, because man is 100% responsible (Heb. 12:14—without sanctification no one will see the Lord, and James 2:17—faith without works is dead).

Tullian Tchividjian appears to emphasize grace, but not obedience, and the first and second uses of the law, but not the third. The third use of the law (it is a rule for believers' obedience) is briefly stated in one paragraph at http://www.opc.org/qa.html?question_id=165, which also summarizes the other two uses, and some of the vital importance of the third use of the law is stated in the Westminster Confession 19.6, 7
http://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_19

- this shows how God's moral law functions now not as a covenant of works, but as a covenant of grace. Dr. David Murray carefully expresses some concerns about Tchividjian's errors of emphasis, omission, and implication at

<http://headhearhand.org/blog/2012/12/11/tullian-keeps-digging/>

. Admittedly, errors of these sorts are difficult to perceive, admit, and correct, yet they are real, and can and do have the consequence of leading people into error, as in this case, Tchividjian rightly opposes legalism, but wrongly leads people toward antinomianism.

Another person replied to my comment, "If you got antinomianism out of that, then you and I read different articles."

I replied: You're right that I read other articles by Tchividjian, and about his teaching, and they influenced my opinion that his teaching leads toward antinomianism. But his teaching in this particular article does as well.

He said, "Sanctification is forgetting about yourself. As J. C. Kromsigt said, 'The good seed

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cannot flourish when it is repeatedly dug up for the purpose of examining its growth.”

However, the Bible says “First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother’s eye. 43 For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, 44 for each tree is known by its own fruit.” (Luke 6:42-44) “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” (Acts 20:28) “Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.” (1 Cor. 11:29) “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?- unless indeed you fail to meet the test!” (2 Cor. 13:5)

How is Tchividjian’s phrase “forgetting about yourself” not contradicting (saying the opposite words of) Jesus’ words “your own eye,” “own fruit,” and Paul’s words “Pay careful attention to yourselves”? How is Tchividjian’s word (quoted from Kromsigt) “examining” not a contradiction of Paul’s use of the word “examine,” particularly in his command, “Examine yourselves”?

In the context of the quote from Kromsigt which follows it, it would appear that Tchividjian’s statement “Sanctification is forgetting about yourself” means sanctification is intentionally forgetting about examining yourself to see whether you are obeying God’s law, which sure sounds like giving up on intentional obedience to God’s law. Opposing this right use of the law is antinomianism.

If you read the rest of what Kromsigt wrote surrounding the quote (Bavinck gives a fuller quote here <http://books.google.com/books?id=PP3dswxEfM8C&pg=PA118&lpg=PA118&dq=J.+C.+Kromsigt&source=bl&ots=4pnkB3h1uY&sig=q3VVYX-E4VxYJd50PnELaen4KB4&hl=en&sa=X&ei=RiJXUtuGls6DrQH78YFY&ved=0CD4Q6AEwAg#v=onepage&q=J.%20C.%20Kromsigt&f=false>), it is plain he was rightly opposing the self-destructive self-examination of what Bavinck terms “Nomistic pietism” which wrongly grounds assurance on sanctification alone (rather than on God and His promises alone), so loses true assurance of salvation. But rightly opposing an unbiblical self-examination ought not to deny biblical self-examination, which, regrettably, Tchividjian’s quote above does.

My interlocutor replied, “In other words, you’re focusing on a single phrase without addressing his elaborating explanation. That’s called a strawman argument. I could use such tactics in what you’ve said to rather humorous ends.”

I replied,

I addressed his words in two sentences, not "a single phrase." I did not directly quote or interact with his elaborating explanation, though I have it in view, as I indicated in my words "I read other articles by Tchividjian." That's not a straw man. It would be a straw man argument if I mischaracterized his view, but you give no evidence that I have done so.

Would you like me to address his words (and their meaning) in his elaborating explanation?

As I've thought about his article linked above, it appears to me that at points he is making the mistake of claiming *every* view in the church other than his is legalistic. His expressions are too absolute; they may be true as generalizations, but are not true of every Christian's life or doctrine. I appreciate that he qualifies his statements at the beginning of the article with phrases like "too many people" and "too many churches," but at several points, notably later in the article, he acts as if legalism is every church's and every Christian's problem in every part of our being, like when he says "But, ironically, grace offends us even more because it tells us that there's nothing we can do, that everything has already been done." The "we" here is, apparently, every Christian, without distinguishing carefully that while in our flesh we wrongly think we can, but in fact we cannot, do good without God's grace, yet in our new heart, by the Spirit's work, we also rightly know we can do good by God's grace. This is an error of omission due to his error of so emphasizing the unconditionality of God's sovereign administration of grace that he does not give proper expression to the subsequent conditionality of its responsible reception by man. So a further problem in what Tchividjian said here is this: Is it really true that grace "tells us that there's nothing we can do"? No. I'm sure that elsewhere Tchividjian proclaims Paul's teaching, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." But he doesn't do so here, in the words "it tells us that there's nothing we can do." He should be more fully biblical than this, to avoid leading people into antinomianism. Grace tells us there is nothing we can do to cause or add to the sovereign, saving work of God the Father, Son, and Spirit. Grace does not tell us there's nothing we can do, absolutely considered. But Tchividjian's statement was absolute. That is the problem. I would be delighted to learn that Tchividjian's books and preaching express the fuller biblical teaching which I see lacking in his articles online, but what I've read by him shows a consistent pattern of absolute statements of an antinomian and Lutheran sort. As a pastor under whom I did an internship taught me to do in my sermons, the problem needs to be corrected in those statements themselves, not only in qualifications and explanations added after the fact. Otherwise, people follow the error, and go even further into error as they misinterpret what you said.

Another example of his tendency to overgeneralize: while Kromsigt and Tchividjian both focus on one particular kind of self-examination, Tchividjian claims this unbiblical kind of self-examination which he terms “spiritual performancism” is the only kind of self-examination by identifying it as not just one variety of, but simply identical to, works-righteousness, and the one in which whole church is engaged. This is to commit the fallacy of the excluded middle, by ignoring the third, middle option (between legalism and antinomianism) of the full teaching about the third use of the law found in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, to which he subscribes as a minister in the PCA. Tchividjian also uses such exclusive language in the following quote: “So, it doesn’t surprise me at all when I hear people react to grace with suspicion and doubt. It doesn’t surprise me that when people talk about grace, I hear lots of ‘buts and brakes’, conditions and qualifications. That’s just the flesh fighting for its life, after all.” I recognize that by the word “grace” he both 1) rightly means God’s sovereign administration of grace is not conditioned on the merit of man’s works in justification and is not conditioned on man’s works as its first cause in sanctification, and I regret that he 2) wrongly (apparently--and we could explore whether his words actually substantiate my claim here) means man’s responsible reception of grace is not conditioned (in regard to secondary, not primary, causes) on man’s works as part of that reception in sanctification (as expressed in the Westminster Confession 19.6, quoted below). I react to his error in point 2) above by saying Tchividjian ought, but fails, to affirm there is a conditionality in man’s reception of God’s grace in sanctification (as well as in justification, as the Westminster Larger Catechism Q&A 32 says, “The grace of God is manifested in the second covenant, in that he freely provideth and offereth to sinners a mediator, and life and salvation by him; and requiring faith as the condition to interest them in him....”) The problem with his saying “That’s *just* the flesh fighting for its life” is that the word “just” excludes the possibility that there is a third view, such as the “condition” in LC 32, and the qualification expressed in the word “yet” in the Westminster Confession 11.2, which reads, “Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification: yet is it not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love.” Such a qualification is also expressed in the word “although” in the Westminster Confession 19.6, “It is likewise of use to the regenerate, to restrain their corruptions, in that it forbids sin: and the threatenings of it serve to show what even their sins deserve; and what afflictions, in this life, they may expect for them, although freed from the curse thereof threatened in the law. The promises of it, in like manner, show them God’s approbation of obedience, and what blessings they may expect upon the performance thereof: although not as due to them by the law as a covenant of works.”

Tchividjian is rightly fighting a battle against legalism, but wrongly, and I would expect mostly accidentally, fighting a battle with the third use of the law as it is expressed in scripture, the Westminster Standards, and the churches which subscribe to them, including his own. As such, though he attempts to lay the blame for his battle wholly on legalists within the church, part of the blame is also Tchividjian’s antinomian tendencies.