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GRACE VS. WORKS: R.H. Boll & the Premillennial Battle Among Churches of Christ

Richard T. Hughes

In 1968, Stanford Chambers was ninety-one years old. Earlier in the twentieth century, he had served as one of the key leaders of the premillennial movement within Churches of Christ. Now, in the twilight of his life, he reflected on decades of struggle with the mainstream churches and concluded, quite simply, that “the real issue [was] not prophecy, but grace...”

In a fundamental sense, Chambers was right, for premillennial Christians relied on the sovereign grace and rule of God to an extent almost unknown among mainstream congregations in the early and middle years of the twentieth century. In fact, premillennialism by definition embodied a radical distrust of human ability, human works, and human progress, and a profound reliance on the power of God alone to rescue the human race from self and from sin.

The central conviction of all premillennialists underscored this point: God alone had the power to transform this world into a garden of righteousness and peace. No human being or group of human beings had that ability. When God saw fit to work this transformation, he would send Jesus back to earth to inaugurate this cataclysmic change, and to rule over a world renewed. Thus, Jesus’ second coming would be pre-millennial (i.e., prior to the millennium).

Stanford Chambers traced the tradition of grace

in the premillennial movement especially to the Nashville Bible School, founded by David Lipscomb and James A. Harding in 1891. In 1895, a young, German immigrant named Robert H. Boll—the man who would become the foremost leader among premillennial Churches of Christ—enrolled in that school. Also a student there, Chambers later recalled that James A. Harding especially, preached a powerful doctrine of grace. “To Harding,” he recalled, “salvation by grace . . . through faith’ rather than by ‘works’ or deeds of merit was a cherished truth.”

But even at the Nashville Bible School, Harding’s teachings provoked a split in the student body on this issue. “The one class had their spirituality deepened, and others in a measure became crystallized in a legalistic attitude.” Significantly, Chambers recalled, “Robert Boll was one who drank it in.” No wonder that James A. Harding viewed Boll as a model student and proudly proclaimed, “I wouldn’t take a million dollars for him.”

It is likely that no one in the almost 200 year history of Churches of Christ distrusted human ability more completely than did R. H. Boll. This man not only faulted human works designed to achieve divine favor; he even weighed scientific and technological achievements and found them all woefully wanting when compared with the glories of the kingdom of God. Stridently anti-modern, he questioned whether

“the boastful splendor of the twentieth century” and “the roar of its civilization” represented any serious progress at all. And when the United States entered World War I in 1917, Boll counseled Christians to refuse to fight. He dismissed the notion that the war was “a struggle...to make the world safe for democracy,” and grounded his conviction that the Christian belongs to the kingdom of God alone, not to the kingdoms of this world which are penultimate at best.

Similarly, it would be difficult to find any leader in the history of Churches of Christ who relied more fully on the grace of God than did R. H. Boll. In Boll’s theology, divine grace soon became the central term of which his premillennial outlook was but a pale reflection. Boll asked, “Can we ever have a minute’s real peace with God or feel anything more than anxiety and fear toward Him so long as we stand upon this miserable plan of salvation by works?” On the other hand, Boll rejoiced, there was “a way in which we may have peace and assurance...right now... *‘Being therefore justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ...’* (Romans 5:1-2).” With this peace, Boll maintained, one might confidently affirm, “Even so, Come Lord Jesus!”

Like Luther, Boll often spoke of the great gulf that separated the unrighteousness of human beings from the absolute righteousness of God, but also of the righteousness with which God, through His grace, makes his children clean and spotless in His sight. For example, in 1917, he wrote,

Our own righteousness is indeed as filthy rags, and no apron of leaves can clothe our nakedness in the presence of God’s searching holiness...The question...[then] arises, how can any man be saved?...The answer lies in the gospel. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation: “for therein is revealed a righteousness of God from faith unto faith” (Romans 1:17). This “righteousness” is not the fruit of our own works, but a free gift from God (Romans 5:17).

What then for Boll was the place of works? Again, Boll sounded remarkably like Luther. “Our good work,” he argued, “is the fruit of the life and of the good blessings before-hand received, and not the means with which we purchase those favors from God.” Or again, “in proportion as they have known and appreciated His grace they will work. For the faith by which we are justified is also the faith that afterward worketh by love.”

By 1943, Boll had suffered for over thirty years

the kind of rejection and abuse from his own brethren that might have disillusioned many with notions of divine love and grace. But Boll, more tenaciously than ever, now grounded his life in the themes so central to his career, and spoke of the freedom enjoyed by the one who serves in response to grace and not from constraint.

If you are burdened and distressed, and the price of righteousness seems too much, and you find yourself estimating that you have done as much as was expected of you, and thinking God ought to be satisfied with you, then you are a bondman, and yours is inferior work. [But], if you do God’s will, not to make Him love you, but because He loves you; not to obtain His grace, but because that grace works in you mightily; if you don’t work by the piece or by the day, but bring your whole self a willing sacrifice, willing to spend and be spent, and rejoicing in the privilege, you are a free man and happy, a son of God.

By the 1930’s and 1940’s, however, the vision of divine grace that had played such a significant role at the old Nashville Bible School was fast disappearing. More and more, leaders and members of Churches of Christ allowed their cognitive grasp of biblical truths and their ability to follow biblical rules to displace the radical vision of grace that still prevailed in the premillennial wing of the movement. Boll therefore addressed his brothers and sisters among mainstream congregations who were “slow to believe and seize the blessing” of grace.

See what frantic efforts have been made to reduce the beautiful, living Gospel of Christ to a bony skeleton of precepts...There are Christians who would be happy to see the New Testament turned into a code of laws and regulations, emphasized with compelling threats.

But Boll admonished his people to resist these threats, to “be free and grant others their freedom.” Indeed, he wrote, “Let no man lord it over your conscience, and do not tyrannize over the consciences of others. The dingdonging and scolding so common in pulpit and papers, is worse than nothing.”

One wonders, why did mainstream Churches of Christ resist Boll’s vision so strenuously? There were many reasons, to be sure, one of which was the fact

that Boll borrowed from fundamentalist leaders of the early twentieth century a dispensational scheme altogether foreign to Churches of Christ. Most important, however, was the fact that Churches of Christ, in the years following their division with the Disciples, increasingly identified the Kingdom of God with their own movement. Indeed, it became increasingly common for members of Churches of Christ to refuse to pray that portion of the Lord's prayer which asks, "Thy Kingdom come," on the grounds that the kingdom had come in its fullness on the day of Pentecost, and had now been restored among Churches of Christ.

Boll strenuously resisted such a facile identification. For him, the Kingdom of God was the rule of God over all human designs, human schemes, and human kingdoms. It was clear to Boll that the world had not yet arrived at such a state of affairs, and so he spoke of the kingdom as an eschatological reality, yet to come in its fullness. Indeed, for Boll, the fullness of the Kingdom was not a matter of human restoration, as if human beings could manipulate God. The fullness of the Kingdom was, once again, a matter subject to God's own initiative—that is, subject to his

grace. But Boll's refusal to equate the Kingdom of God with a particular movement called Churches of Christ was, for many in the movement, a heresy of the first order.

By 1944, E. R. Harper could proclaim that "R. H. Boll has been fought by every paper, pulpit, preacher and most schools, " and that he and his people had been rejected "as unsound and therefore have been 'marked and avoided' by the church in general." He added, "The papers no longer allow him space to write his views and the pulpits are closed to him, ...and most schools will not allow him to enjoy their fellowship." By 1958, R. H. Boll was dead.

Such was the legacy of R. H. Boll and of the doctrine of grace among the premillennial wing of Churches of Christ in the first half of the twentieth century.

[Editor's note: To a large extent, the following material is excerpted from Richard Hughes' forthcoming history of the Churches of Christ, to be published by Greenwood Press. *For documentation, the reader is referred to the forthcoming book, Churches of Christ.*]