

The Biblical Doctrine of Sanctification

6. Grieving the Holy Spirit

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I. Ephesians 4.30 in the context of 4.1-5.2

Within a threefold exhortation to walk worthily (1) in mutual love (2) as a new self (3) in practical ways, Paul gives the command: **And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God.**

II. What does it mean to grieve the Spirit?

The basic meaning of “to grieve” is to inflict pain, cause grief, make sorrowful, vex, disturb, or disappoint. Thus, it refers to a change in attitude that results in a reaction or a change of action. Because the idea has its roots in changing human emotion, two things stand out in the idea of grieving the Holy Spirit of God: *change* and *emotion*. Because both pertain to God, an important and difficult question surfaces: how can these things be said of God? To answer this question, we need to do some theological digging in four points: paradox, Christology, condescension, and then we will be in position to make the best possible practical application.

A. Paradox

It will be useful to keep the notion of paradox in mind as we do this study. Paradox is an apparent contradiction between interrelated teachings of Scripture. It means that we understand that each teaching is true, even though they are difficult to harmonize. The difficulty is so great that they seem to be contradictory, but we know that they are not contradictory because God has revealed them in Scripture, all that He reveals is true, and must cohere without contradiction.

1. Some examples

Van Til cites prayer in relationship to the eternal counsel of God as an outstanding paradox: “We say on the one hand that prayer changes things and on the other hand we say that everything happens in accordance with God’s plan and God’s plan is immutable” (*Defense* 67-68). Of course, we must immediately introduce the reality of means to begin explaining how these truths cohere, but the point of import is that there seems to be a contradiction between change in God regarding His plan, even though He is unchanging.

Another example is quite direct. In Exodus 32.14, it says that God relented, changed His mind, repented (**And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people**) while in Malachi 3.6, God says that He does not change (**For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed**). Naturally, we have to carefully search each context for clues of harmony, but the point is that we face the difficulty of change in God who does not change.

Genesis 6.6 furnishes us with an example closer to the point of Ephesians 4.30 because it refers to repentance as well as grief in God: **And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.** KJV: **And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart.**

2. Some cautions

Let’s dig deeper into this text. To steer your thinking, consider what might be wrong, overstated, or imbalanced in Calvin’s interpretation of Gen 6.6:

The repentance which is here ascribed to God does not properly belong to him, but has reference to our understanding of him. For since we cannot comprehend him as he is, it is necessary that, for our sake, he should in a certain sense, transform himself. That repentance cannot take place in God, easily appears from this single consideration, that nothing happens which is by him unexpected or unforeseen. The same reasoning, and remark, applies to what follows, that God was affected with grief. Certainly God is not sorrowful or sad; but remains for ever like himself in his celestial and happy repose: yet,

because it could not otherwise be known how great is God's hatred and detestation of sin, therefore the Spirit accommodates himself to our capacity (Genesis 248-49).²

There is (seems to be) a glaring failure in Calvin here at the same time that he does a great job of preserving something extremely important.

What is the glaring failure?

What is the great job?

The same questions can be raised regarding how Calvin states the goal of this description of God:

...to teach us, that from the time when man was so greatly corrupted, God would not reckon him among his creatures; as if he would say, 'This is not my workmanship; this is not that man who was formed in my image, and whom I had adorned with such excellent gifts: I do not deign now to acknowledge this degenerate and defiled creature as mine.' Similar to this is what he says, in the second place, concerning grief; that God was so offended by the atrocious wickedness of men, as if they had wounded his heart with mortal grief.....this paternal goodness and tenderness ought, in no slight degree, to subdue in us the love of sin; since God, in order more effectually to pierce our hearts, clothes himself with our affections (249).

What seems to be the glaring failure here? What good job does he do?

Lesson: we need a better way

As with any passage, but especially so when we deal with paradoxes, we must do our dead level best to do justice to each text by not forcing one to fit the other in some strained way. Then we can follow Calvin's encouragement to stop inquiry where the Holy Spirit closes His holy lips.¹ At that point, the reasoning self rests, we rest, on Christ the solid Rock; and there we bow in worship and praise.

Thus, we may be able to make some sense of things by saying the God is not really grieved, but that is problematic. It is said that His reaction or response is like human grief; it is metaphor; for Calvin it is an "as if." It is not what God feels but what He does that is like what we do when grieved. For example, we pull away and alter the relationship with someone who grieves us. Thus, some make a good effort to preserve God's immutability by saying that these texts only indicate a changed relationship of God to us. Because God is unchanging, His relationship with us must change if we move from obedience to disobedience. The change is from blessing to cursing; there is no change in God. Then, to repent and be grieved merely express the altered relationship. This is good to a point, but along with the passages that affirm God's immutability, we have passages that, on the face of it, affirm that God repents and grieves. They seem to contradict the notion of God remaining forever in His celestial and happy repose. So, while we must strongly affirm that God is immutable, we must search for a better way to handle the relevant texts that present Him with changing emotions.

That way is the thesis of the book by Scott Oliphint, *God with us*. This author seeks to explain the texts about change in God in relationship to texts about His unchangeableness by analogy with the preeminent paradox, which is the mystery of God manifest in the flesh.

¹ "When God stops speaking, we end our quest. Scripture is the school of the Holy Spirit, in which, as nothing is omitted that is both necessary and useful to know, so nothing is taught but what is expedient to know. Therefore we must guard against depriving believers of anything disclosedin Scripture, lest we seem either wickedly to defraud them of the blessing of their God or to accuse and scoff at the Holy Spirit for having published what it is in any way profitable to suppress. Let us, I say, permit the Christian man to open his mind and ears to every utterance of God directed to him, provided it be with such restraint that when the Lord closes his holy lips, he also shall at once close the way to inquiry"(Institutes, 3.21.3).