

PREACHING TO GOD'S IMAGE-BEARERS

Why the Charismatics have got it right, but don't know why

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My aim in this article is to embolden preachers and encourage evangelists as we understand more fully how God has made us.

A Sense of the Divine

There is not a human being that you will ever meet who is not made in the image of God. No matter how fallen, how broken, how unbelieving, each and every one of us has God's image stamped upon us. The sceptical agnostic, the hardened atheist, whether they like it or not, have been made by God and in the image of God.

John-Paul Sartre, atheist, said in the 20th Century, 'that God exists I cannot deny, but that my whole being cries out for God I cannot forget.'¹ Each and every one of us has a hunger for God. Blaise Pascal famously said,

What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words, by God himself.²

John Calvin's exposition of *sensus divinitatis* in Book 1 of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is seminal. He says,

No long or toilsome proof is needed to elicit evidences that serve to illuminate and affirm the divine majesty...there is within the human mind...an awareness of divinity, a sense of divinity can never be effaced...God has sown a seed of religion in all men.³

Bavinck succinctly puts it,

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Essays in Aesthetics*, (Washington Square Press 1966), p.11.

² Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, Translated with an Introduction by A J Krailsheimer, (Penguin Books, 1995) – X, 147, p.45.

³ John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, Translated by Ford Lewis Battles, (The Westminster Press, 1960), 1.5.9 (p.62), 1.3.1 (p.44), 1.3.3 (p.45), 1.4.1 (p.47).

that the revelation of God in all the works of his hands would be quite unknowable to man if God had not planted in his soul an ineradicable sense of his existence and being. The indisputable fact is that God Himself has added to the external revelation in nature an internal revelation to man.⁴

He speaks of man even in his fallen state,

even though like the lost son in the parable he has fled his paternal home, still even in the most distant straying, he cherishes a memory of his origin and destination. In his profoundest fall he still retains certain small remains of the image of God after which he was made.⁵

What this immediately does is instil confidence into our preaching and our evangelism. We are speaking to what is known.

Of course, Romans 1 is a brutal exposé of what humanity has done with that knowledge. Paul writes, ‘For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.’ For the purposes of this article, we need to know that the Apostle is stating: what can be known about God is plain to them, God has shown it to them, and in v.21 ‘for although they knew God’, of course that knowledge he is speaking about is not saving faith, but humanity, through creation and their conscience which has a sense of the divine.

One of the battles we face as Christians in our day is that of discouragement, of a feeling that nothing is working. There is no doubt that the work in the UK at the moment is slow. Whilst the gospel runs in other parts of the world, it seems like it is retracting in many parts of Britain. However, the fact that men and women are made in the image of God should give us huge encouragement.

The people to whom you preach and are seeking to reach know there is a God. When you preach the gospel to them there is something in them that chimes with its message. It is that which often produces the antagonism and antipathy to it, but our preaching and teaching is not in vain.

Our applications must drive at people’s conscience. In our evangelism we recognise that the people we are speaking to have an intrinsic worth, but more than that there is within them a recognition that there is a God. The truth and reality are on our side.

⁴ Herman Bavinck, *The Wonderful Works of God*, (Westminster Seminary Press, 2019), p.26.

⁵ Herman Bavinck, *The Wonderful Works of God*, p.26.

In the story of Peter Pan we are told that every time someone says they don't believe in fairies, a fairy dies and so boys in school playgrounds have terrorised girls by repeatedly shouting 'I don't believe in fairies'. but with God the fact that people claim that he does not exist has no bearing on the reality of his existence. We must not lose confidence in what God has told us regarding our humanity.

North is north regardless of whether people like it or not. They may protest it and deny it, but north is still north. Holding to the truth that people are made in God's image and have a sense of the reality of God, doesn't change, no matter how much people protest.

Made in the Image of God

We are further helped as we clarify what it means that men and women have been made in the image of God. The image bearer derives his dignity from God. That in itself is quite important: man is a creature, and his dignity and worth are grounded in God's creation. As R. C. Sproul says, 'Man's dignity is derived and dependent, not intrinsic'⁶.

We are not God and yet in a sense we are like God. An image reflects something of its creator. It is a likeness of something beyond itself. It is not the original, but it mirrors the original. So, in what way are men and women made in the image of God?

The Westminster Catechism gives a masterful answer to Q10 'How did God create man?' God created man male and female, after his own image, in knowledge, righteousness and holiness with dominion over the creatures.

In some ways it is hard to think of a more prescient answer than this one. There are two biological sexes - male and female that are given by God. There are not numerous genders from which you can choose.

Humankind is created with knowledge. God created Adam with a true understanding of the world he had put him in, it wasn't an exhaustive knowledge, but he knew about God, himself, and the world. Sin has affected that and marred it, but that knowledge, though tainted, remains.

When Adam was created, he was holy and righteous, he knew what was good and right and desired to do that. As the catechism outlines, the task that he was given was to have dominion over the creatures - to fill the earth and subdue it. Mankind is given a purpose to fulfil.

As Linleigh Roberts puts it, 'Man is wonderful only because he is made by God, like God and for God'.⁷

⁶ R.C Sproul, *Right Now Counts Forever*, (Ligonier Ministries, 2021), Volume 2, p.200.

⁷ Linleigh Roberts, *Let us make Man*, (Banner of Truth, 1988), p.13.

Of course, sin has tragically affected this. As a result of the fall, human beings are darkened in their understanding and are ignorant, without God, and without hope. Their righteousness and holiness have been stripped from them, there is none righteous no not one and yet the mandate of being fruitful and multiplying which was given to Adam and Eve remains. We see that same command reiterated to Noah and his family when they come out of the ark after the flood.

What is the image of God in man?

Theologians have debated endlessly on what this means. Phillip Edgcumbe Hughes in his book *True Image* helpfully outlines 6 aspects of what it means for human beings to be made in the image of God.⁸

Firstly, *Personality* - the God of the Bible is one God in three persons. Human beings reflect God in his personhood.

Secondly, *Spirituality* - Hughes argues that we are 'religious' beings. We were made to worship. As we see in our age, even though man has stopped worshipping the God of the Bible, it isn't that they have ceased to worship, it's that they worship anything.

Thirdly, *Rationality* - as God thinks, so do human beings. They have the God-like capacity of being able to think, reason, speak, plan.

Fourthly *Morality* - at creation God created man to be holy as he is holy.

The fifth element is *Authority* - as we noted above, man is given authority over the earth, he is to reflect God's ultimate authority.

Lastly, *Creativity* - as God is a creative being so are we, as he shaped and fashioned this world, under him, we are to do the same.

Each of these aspects has been marred by sin's entrance into this world and yet these elements of our being made in the image of God has not been obliterated. To use Francis Schaeffer's magnificent phrase, we are 'glorious ruins'.

Dick Keyes very simply defines the image of God thus: 'Humankind bears the image of God in two ways. Adam was like God in the way he was, and also in what he did, in his being and also in his doing.'⁹

All of this helps us in our preaching. Romans 1-4 clearly expounds that man is without excuse: both the internal witness of the conscience and the external witness of creation give

⁸ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The True Image*, (William B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), p.51-62.

⁹ Dick Keyes, *Beyond Identity*, (Paternoster Press, 1998), p.33.

us confidence to address every person we meet knowing that as we speak to them about the God who made them and they are aware that he exists.

Their conscience still speaks to them. The well-known illustration is that of a ball you want to keep under water in the swimming pool, but it keeps popping up. The more you press it into the water, the more it bursts up above the surface. And so it is with the denial of God. As people deny the God in whom they live, move, and have their being, they cannot but help come up against the reality that he is, and that there is a God who gives their lives meaning. The conscience itself is unreliable, tainted by sin, damaged over time, and yet the witness of Scripture is that it speaks of the reality of God.

Creation mandates

As we further explore Genesis 1 and 2 we find that God has hardwired certain things into creation. There are creation mandates common to all of humanity. John Murray in his outstanding work *Principles of Conduct*, says,

The creation ordinances, as we may call them, are the procreation of offspring, the replenishing of the earth, subduing of the same, dominion over the creatures, labour, the weekly Sabbath and marriage.¹⁰

These are pre-fall and yet survive the fall. They have been given by God to humanity for the good and flourishing of all his creatures. Where these creation ordinances are deliberately set aside, only harm can be the result. The lack of emphasis on these in the contemporary Reformed church in the UK has been to the detriment in church life and for society.

As churches we have spoken out faithfully against the redefinition of marriage, and yet I fear that we have not spoken as clearly on how we are pro marriage. We have often been reluctant to address problems that married couples face or work hard at strengthening the marriages within our church. Even within our congregations there is an alarming number of marriage breakdowns.

As a minister I need to realise that when the question of marriage and sexuality comes up, I am immediately into speaking about the gospel. Not one of us is without sin in this area. We must talk about God's good design, repentance and forgiveness and God's law. In many ways this issue, as hard as it is, is a wonderful opportunity.

We need to think holistically. Countering the narrative that the world gives on relationships, will mean teaching specifically focussed on the needs of married couples, singles, young people and even our children who are growing up in a sexualised world. What I have come to see is that the Christian sexual ethic is in itself beautiful and attractive. We have a better story and a better alternative to the world.

¹⁰ John Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), p.27.

It is not difficult to see the damage that so called sexual liberation has done to our culture. We need to recover our boldness in not only defending a biblical worldview of marriage and sex, but actively proclaiming it, being unashamed of Jesus' words in this area. We cannot hide behind expository preaching in saying that we will address it when the topic comes up in the Bible. It will mean addressing these subjects head-on and bringing God's truth to bear. It needs to be done from the pulpit, but also in other teaching contexts in church life and evangelism, allowing time for push back and questions.

The family breakdown over the past 40 years is at epidemic levels, and yet God's good design for the family is wonderfully attractive. Sometimes I think a Christian family just living a normal, faithful, God-honouring lifestyle with a husband loving his wife, a wife submitting to her husband and children honouring their parents, is more radically counter-cultural than anything else in our culture.

On issues of life and death as Christians we cannot be silent. With regard to abortion, we again are right to speak out of this evil, but more than that is demanded of us. We must seek positive ways to engage in this issue so that the world does not only hear from us this is wrong, but that there is hope and forgiveness and healing.

Euthanasia seems to come up with alarming regularity in our media, and as Christians over the centuries we have been at the forefront of caring for those at the end of life. We have a message for the world that life is given by God. Yes, modern medicine and advances in science do create some difficult circumstances, and yet that God is the one who gives and takes away, resonates with mankind.

In the whole area of vocation, we need to teach that we have been created to work and work in and of itself is a good thing. Work is tainted and spoiled by the fall, but work is a gift of God. In our daily work, whether it be paid or unpaid, we are fulfilling that mandate we have been given by God to bring order out of chaos, to subdue the earth and to rule over creation. As teachers of God's word, we must do the hard yards of helping God's people connect their daily drudgery to God's purposes and plan from creation. To know the dignity of work and its rightful place in our world. This again is radically different from a world which either makes too much of work in idolising it, or too little of it, regarding it as a shackle from which to be set free.

The Christian is given a picture of life in God's world lived with purpose and meaning. Our understanding of what God has done in creating humanity effects the drudgery of our 9 to 5 and transforms it with meaning. It speaks powerfully to our world.

Creator/ Creature distinctive

As God's creatures we are finite, and our limits reflect God's design. That is our Creator's intent and is good news. We live in a world that has bought into the pressure of efficiency and endless 'to do' lists. But we were made to be dependent on God, dependent on others and even dependent on the earth. As a church we are to radically model this, but also hold it out to the world.

We need to talk more about sleep! God doesn't sleep - he neither slumbers nor sleeps - but you as a creature need sleep. In fact, it is a precious gift from God. You sleep because you are a creature, it is a reminder you need rest, you cannot do it all. You have a finite number of hours to get your work done and so you need rest. I live in a city which prides itself on working ever increasing hours, where the standard response to the question 'How are you?' is 'I'm tired'. As Christians we can live radically different lives with different values knowing that we were made for a different purpose

The Law written on their hearts

One other aspect that the Apostle Paul draws out in Romans 2 when speaking of the Gentiles, is that they did not have the law in the way the Jews did, but they still at times conformed to the law. He makes the shattering assertion, '*They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts.*' Paul is not saying that the Law is written on the unbelieving heart in the same way as Jeremiah has prophesied in Jeremiah 31:33 that, in the new covenant, 'I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts,' but John Murray states that '*The work of the law is in generated on our nature, is antecedant to the operations of conscience and the cause of them*'.¹¹ Murray is saying there is an innate and an inborn understanding of the law which comes before the work of conscience in awakening the sinner. The conscience wakes us up to the reality of a broken law, it is in that sense that the law is written on the unbelieving heart.

Calvin is worth quoting at length:

We cannot conclude from this passage that there is in men a full knowledge of the law, but only that there are some seeds of justice implanted in their nature. This is evidenced by such facts as these, that all the gentiles alike institute religious rites, make laws to punish adultery, theft, and murder, and commend good faith in commercial transactions and contracts. In this way they prove their knowledge that God is to be worshiped, that adultery, theft, and murder, are evil, and that honesty is to be esteemed.¹²

It is not that people know who this God is, as their understanding is darkened, but as Calvin says, 'It is sufficient to know that they think there is a God, and that honour and worship are due to Him.'. That gives us enough to work on as preachers as we can confidently appeal to both creation and their conscience.

What is the law to which Paul is referring? From the context in Romans, it is clear that it is the law he is describing which has been revealed to Israel, the moral law of God, supremely revealed in the 10 Commandments at Sinai, but as is clear, even from what Paul has alluded to, in Romans 2 that everyone knows this law.

¹¹ John Murray, *Epistle to the Romans*, (Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1967), p.75.

¹² John Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries. The Epistles of Paul to the Romans and Thessalonians*, Translated by R. Mackenzie, (Oliver and Boyd, 1960), p.48.

The Law in the Garden

We can go further, as divines such as Thomas Boston and Thomas Watson have done, and understand that Adam in the garden of Eden broke the 10 Commandments. At one point in Reformed thought this was common, but it is extremely rare to see this expounded today.

Let me briefly outline how Adam broke the 10 Commandments:

1. He broke the first commandment by not putting God first, he put himself first. He made himself God.
2. The second commandment was broken by his refusal to follow God's directions for how he is to be worshipped.
3. The third commandment was not kept by Adam and Eve as they tarnished his name, they took him for granted. In Luke 3:38 we are told Adam is God's son, he bore God's name and he bore it in vain when he fell.
4. Remember the Sabbath Day to Keep it Holy - Adam did not continue in that rest. He took matters into his own hands instead of relying on his God.
5. Adam did not honour his Heavenly Father, when he sinned against God.
6. Adam became a murderer - the wages of sin is death.
7. He committed spiritual adultery against God.
8. He allowed his wife Eve to reach out for what was not hers, thus stealing from God.
9. In believing the lie of the serpent, he doubted the character of God.
10. He allowed discontentment to fester in his heart leading him to covet and act.

The Law at Sinai

The revelation of the law at Sinai functions in a number of ways. 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt out of the house of slavery.' It is a declaration of who God is and of his character. It is, if we can illustrate it, a portrait of our God – 'I am, so you will be' - the command 'Be Holy for I am Holy' (Leviticus 11:44,45, 19:2, 20:26, 1 Peter 1:16). The Lord portrays God's holiness to us and as his people, Israel was to reflect who he is. He is the only God and so we must worship only him. He is faithful and so we must be faithful. He has given us all we need and so we must not steal. Our lives are in his hands and so that should made us content.

His law is also a mirror - it shows us our sin. It reveals to us how far short we fall. In the words of Galatians 3:24 - the law is our schoolmaster to lead us to Christ, the one who perfectly fulfilled God's law.

But the law is also a window - it shows us the paths of obedience and fruitfulness, it puts before us the way of blessing and prosperity. It showed Israel how they were to live and the fruit of living that way.

The moral law of God is permanent and timeless. Even in the way that the laws were given at Sinai, that is made clear. The 10 Commandments were spoken by God and written by the finger of God. The other laws were given through the mediator Moses, but there is a distinction made in Exodus 19:19, 20:1. The people hear the thunder of his voice. The 10 Commandments were written on tablets of stone, whilst the rest of the law wasn't. The two stone tablets were placed in the Ark of the Covenant, whilst the rest of the law wasn't.

Preaching God's Law Evangelistically

As we preach God's law for God's world in this way it has enormous potential to gain traction with unbelievers. There's not a culture in the world that thinks murder and stealing are a good thing. The moral law is written into God's world as the way to live.

J. John, who is a Charismatic evangelist, has understood this regarding the 10 Commandments and although we might disagree with some of his applications from a Reformed perspective, he models to us how to preach the 10 Commandments evangelistically.¹³

His title headings for his sermons on the Decalogue, beginning at the tenth of the 10 Commandments, are as follows:

1. Find true contentment - You shall not covet
2. Hold to the truth - You shall not lie
3. Prosper with a clear conscience - You shall not steal
4. Affair-proof our relationships - You shall not commit adultery
5. Manage your anger - You shall not murder
6. Keep the peace with your parents - Honour your parents
7. Catch your breath - Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy
8. Take God seriously - You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God
9. Know God - You shall not make idols
10. Live by priorities - You shall have no other Gods

J. John takes the commandments and shows us the positive application of the law. He does speak of the prohibition too, but also points us to Jesus Christ who alone fulfilled the law perfectly.

¹³ J. John, *The Ten Commandments*, (Philo Trust, 2020).

In researching this article, it has been interesting for me to see that much of the Charismatic church's evangelism is around the creation mandates, whilst more Reformed churches have shied away from this. It is often said that the gospel is not primarily about peoples felt needs, and of course it isn't, it is about our ultimate need to be brought back to God. But those felt needs are pointing to something. The felt needs point us to our ultimate need which is found in Jesus Christ.

In not having a fully orb'd view of God's law we have lost some of our ability to speak relevantly into the daily needs, desires, and problems of our day.

We are living in a culture where moral life is disintegrating, and yet I fear that much of the way we in the Reformed world have done evangelism, is not gaining traction with the world.

Potential ways forward

I realised this personally when I met regularly with a group of men in their 20s to discuss the Christian faith. We read through Mark's Gospel and John's Gospel and what I noticed was that, regardless of what passage we looked at, their questions were all around the creation mandates and the Creator/ creature distinction:

Marriage - how can my relationship be better? Why are my relationships constantly breaking down?

Parenting - my partner and I are struggling with a new-born. How do you discipline a toddler?

Sex - how can God forgive me after what I've done? Isn't the Christian view of sexuality impossible, abhorrent, and yet beautifully attractive? I'm addicted to porn.

Life - how can you think abortion is wrong?

Death - why is it so painful? Why can I not get over this? Is there any hope beyond death?

Work and rest - why is work so frustrating? Does it ever change? What is the point? Why am I always tired even when I go on holiday? How can I stop work from taking over my life?

I want to argue that God has put these questions into the heart of man. It is as if he has laid down grooves into which we can pour the gospel. There is an echo in their conscience as we address these issues. The danger is in answering these questions, we can end up looking like life coaches. But a biblical answer to all of the above will bring a person to an end of themselves and show them the provision of Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.

Getting Practical

In all the areas I've listed above there are ways that we as a church can speak into this and embed the good news of the gospel into the answers to these questions. Many of the Charismatic churches are doing this, but as far as I can tell, few Reformed churches in the UK are doing so.

Marriage. Are there ways we can run evenings on marriage? It is an easy invite to people. There are people in our churches that have had fruitful marriages for 40 or 50 years. People will listen, there is wisdom to be mined from such people and we cannot speak of marriage without pointing them to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The truth is that relationships break down ultimately because our relationship with God isn't right.

Sex. Sex is a beautiful gift from God, it is given only to be used within the safe space of marriage between a husband and wife. The damage that sex breaking out of that safe space has done in our society and in millions of lives is incalculable. But there is forgiveness, there is cleansing. On the issue of pornography, we must expose it and show it for what it is. The life according to God's law is the good life. We have a message of hope and freedom that our world needs. The danger is that when this subject comes up we can be defensive and (dare I say it?) embarrassed, at the biblical world view. Yet the biblical perspective is life giving and wonderfully attractive.

Parenting. Could we reach out seeking to help families in our area? John and Ann Benton have written some brilliant material helping churches to do this and again you cannot speak of parenting without speaking of God's purposes that there is only one perfect Heavenly Father.¹⁴

Work and rest. In a city that never sleeps, where there is the constant battle with tiredness, where the joy and wearisome nature of work is clear, the Creator and creature distinction could not be more needed in our world. It would take creativity to address this in a way that speaks to non-Christians, but the topic could not be more relevant.

Life and death. It is here that I think as Christians in the light of the Covid pandemic, where once again death was front and centre, we can speak clearly to our culture. As Christians we understand the horror of death and what it has done. For years it was the unspoken hidden reality, and then for two years, every time you watched the TV, death and its victims were paraded in front of your eyes. As Christians we can talk about grief, that death brings a separating from ourselves and from the people we love and ultimately from God. We can reach out into our communities with the love of Christ and the hope of the gospel in the light of death.

Tim Keller is one modern writer who has published three short evangelistic books on birth, marriage and death.¹⁵ These are touching points in many lives, easy give aways to people who are at those stages of life.

¹⁴ John and Ann Benton, *Aren't they lovely when they're asleep?* (Christian Focus Publications, 2011). The Bentons have written a number of helpful books in the area of parenting and marriage that are all helpful.

¹⁵ Tim Keller - *On Birth, On Death, On Marriage* - all 3 published by Hodder and Stoughton, 2020.

Not enough...

What I am arguing for is that these felt needs are pointing people to a deeper need. By seeking to speak to people along these grooves that God has put in the human heart, we are more likely to gain a listening as we explain what Christ has come to do for us and bring to us.

The creation mandates an understanding. So often our preaching of the gospel does not get traction, doesn't stick. I wonder if by reaching out along the lines I have outlined above we show to people the credibility of a Christian worldview, we demonstrate the difference that the Lordship of Christ has made.

There are tramlines which God has put into the heart of humans on which the message of the gospel is to run.

Our preaching must convey to people that God is not just some concept, some idea, but he is the sovereign living God who has not spared his only Son but given him up for us all. He has visited and redeemed his people in the person of his Son Jesus Christ. We live in his world; we breathe his air; we owe him.

The preacher in Ecclesiastes 3:11 tells us, 'He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.'

We see the reality there that God has placed into humanity - *eternity*. They are aware there is a God, they are aware there is a being greater than they, they understand that this life is not all there is. Every time I take a funeral at a crematorium there is the reminder that this life cannot be all there is. No one goes to a crematorium and thinks this is what it was meant to be, this is how life should end. God has put eternity in our hearts and yet without God working, we cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

You can convince men and women of the existence of God and that he has created them, but without saving faith in Jesus Christ, there is no way to the Father. There is one Mediator between God and Man, the man Christ Jesus. We preach him - the true man, the final Adam.

We point to him. Colossians 3:15,16. 'He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities - all things were created through him and for him.'

He is the goal of creation. We mustn't be satisfied by diagnosing humanity's problems, but as we show people the needs that they have, the ache that they long for that Christ meets all the needs.

We preach the image of the invisible of God to the image of God.

Thou, O Christ, art all I want;
More than all in Thee I find;
Raise the fallen, cheer the faint,
Heal the sick and lead the blind.
Just and holy is Thy name,
I am all unrighteousness;
Vile and full of sin I am,
Thou art full of truth and grace.