

Wineskins Magazine

The Gospel Story

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Too Good to Be True

by Rubel Shelly
June, 1993

What's the most astounding, sensational, eye-popping thing you've heard lately?

Here's my real-life, serious candidate for life's most implausible fact: *God loves me, has saved me in Jesus Christ, and will soon welcome me to live with him in heaven!*

"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" ([Romans 8:1](#)). Astonishing! Incredible! Too good to be true?

Here is the way teachers who are not led by the Spirit of God teach forgiveness and security: "Well, you need to realize that you can lose your salvation, that it is possible to fall from grace. So there won't be any condemnation for those who remain faithful, continue to grow in spiritual things, stay away from the old sins you used to commit, and show the fruit of continual transformation."

Can Christians fall from grace? Absolutely. Are we obligated to put off the old man and put on the new? Of course. But Paul announces God's merciful verdict on Christians before the trial starts. [No condemnation!](#)

"Rubel, you just can't put such strong emphasis on grace. People will take it as *permission* to sin!"

Both Paul and I know that grace is subject to abuse. Does grace mean that Christians can just go ahead and sin deliberately? God forbid! ([Romans 6:1](#)).

Grace is not God's permission to sin. We already have that! No, not his advice or consent. But God made us to be radically free people and will not treat us as puppets. If we want to sin, he will not stop us. But the notion that it helps people to avoid sin by filling them with guilt, terror, and neurotic insecurity is an overrated theory of holiness.

God's answer to sin is not "Stop it, scumbag!" but "Look at my son on the cross, and see how much I love you!" Where sin increased, grace increased all the more. His one righteous act brings life for all men. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Unthinkable! *But true!*

So believe it and weep. Weep for joy. And out of a spirit of gratitude for his stunning love, honor him in obedience born of gratitude rather than guilt, of security rather than shame.

In this issue of *Wineskins*, we explore this exciting theme of the gospel of the grace of God. Critics and enemies will be disappointed to find that we do *not* offer a "grace only" doctrine that denies human responsibility; searchers and discouraged souls will perhaps take heart to find that we *do* believe in a God who is greater than our human insufficiency.

Getting Off the Treadmill

by Mike Cope
June, 1993

Excerpt from *One Holy Hunger: Discovering the God You've Never Known* by Mike Cope, Sweet Publishing Co. Used by permission.

A few years ago my dad and my best friend spent a morning together jogging. Well, actually only my dad was jogging. My friend was grinning. Even though both are veterans of several marathons, this morning my friend was practicing cardiology, while my father was being put to the test, trying to find out if he needed to worry about some heartbeat irregularities.

So with his best no-one-beats-me-on-this-machine look, my doctor friend kicked on his undefeated treadmill. (Of course, I was there, too. I wouldn't have missed this show for anything!) At first it was a breeze – a nice talkative stroll in central Arkansas. But every couple of minutes the pace changed. The road would get steeper and would move more quickly.

It didn't take long for beads of sweat to start appearing and then running like a tiny creek down my dad's face. And then a few minutes later a dam had burst and the little creek had become the mighty Mississippi. His pulse shot up like a space shuttle. The course became steeper and faster – and less fun. The worst part of this deal is that my dad never got anywhere. He remained in the same spot, just trying not to be thrown off. The treadmill is a wicked machine that has many victories and no defeats.

This is a graphic picture of the lives many Christians lead. In nearly every aspect of their lives, they feel like they're on a treadmill. They can never quite do enough or be quite good enough. And just when they think they are up to speed, someone turns up the machine, and they are playing catch-up again.

Fallout from the Treadmill

We are surrounded by the fall-out from the treadmill of “works righteousness.” You can see the spiritual exhaustion in some people's faces. They constantly worry about going to hell. “Have I done enough?” “Will I have time for one last prayer before I die?” “Where do I stand on the curve?”

Though they become physically exhausted, they dare not slow down or get off. So instead they seek to pay God off – through good deeds, and through nonstop working. Every sermon they hear on commitment (a needed biblical theme!) only turns up the speed of the machine, makes the course steeper, and makes them think they'll collapse any second. They never feel restful in their relationship with God.

The fallout also strikes the emotional lives of these weary Christians. Their emotions carry them through a debilitating cycle of guilt, anger, depression, and low self-esteem. Inwardly they can

be filled with resentment, rage, self-hate, and self-blame. They refuse to forgive themselves and indulge in self-punishment.

Perhaps the worst part of this whole process is that their lives become filled with garbage. But this garbage doesn't just fill *their* lives. It seeps out like nuclear waste to contaminate those around. The sufferers package the garbage, put a bow on it, and give it to their children as a present. It eventually brings a putrid smell to marriages, families, and friendships. Since they hate to be on the treadmill alone, they (Often unknowingly) try to pull others on with them.

Not only is this treadmill a problem for Christians, it's also a discouragement to those who are watching the performance. Watching my dad on the treadmill certainly didn't make me want to get on it. It was not a pleasant sight. In the same way, many would-be Christians watch us struggle to be perfect. This is not an image that draws people to the Lord. In fact, it causes many to decide not to even try. We make being a Christian look so difficult and tiresome, why would anyone want to attempt it? Just watching us is a workout!

Barriers to Accepting Grace

Some have a difficult time accepting the grace of God because of various barriers.

Theological barriers are created when we have digested a steady diet of salvation by human effort – a meal that leaves us bloated but starving.

One woman about my age told me she had recurring dreams of God requiring her to tiptoe across a high-wire that had been stretched across a wide, deep canyon. In the dream, Jesus was actually taunting her, trying to make her lose her concentration and fall off.. Needless to say, her spiritual life was a disaster – because her God was against her!

Another Christian said that she abhorred the idea of prayer because for her it was like being called to the principal's office back in junior high. It wasn't likely to be a winning deal.

Trying to earn God's approval by our performance is perhaps the oldest and most persistent heresy. I know so many who refuse the label of legalist but who continue to affirm by their actions that salvation comes from our performance rather than from Jesus' performance.

Even though they know better intellectually, they emotionally imagine God grading on a curve. The grades might be based on obedience or devotional time or evangelistic results or doctrinal accuracy. But however they're measured, these people know they fall short. They live as though God were waiting for them to do a little more, be a little better, precision tune their doctrine. And they're sure he winces as he watches.

Cultural barriers have made it difficult to accept God's incredible message of grace. As Americans we've been schooled in the thinking of self-reliance; you get what you need by your own individual effort. You earn your pay, earn respect, and earn a promotion. In other cultures, an aged person would proudly announce at the center of the village that her children are caring

for her in her old age. But in our society, many are ashamed to admit that their middle-aged children are having to help them out in their retirement years.

The atmosphere of self-reliance is also regularly swept by the winds of activism. “God helps those who help themselves.” This philosophy doesn’t mix well with the gospel story, where God helps those who can’t help themselves ([Romans 5:6-8](#)).

Experiential barriers cause many to choke on the pure, sparkling water of grace. We are all born with basic emotional needs that should be met in families – needs like unconditional love, acceptance, and security. If these needs aren’t met, we can be doubtful that anyone – even God – would offer us such love and acceptance.

And, of course, because those needs haven’t been filled, many people are hungry for something that they aren’t sure exists. For some it’s because of physical or emotional abuse at home. For others it’s because their parents were too busy to make them feel secure. Many times I’ve heard college students say, “My folks gave me everything I needed – everything but love.”

For others grace comes hard because they were raised in a home that held up unattainable standards. Their parents could never be pleased. In some of those homes, affection was withheld as a means of control. (One thirty-something woman said she had been on a long guilt trip with her mom as the travel agent.) In these families, the message that says “Your behavior was not acceptable” was often translated “*you* are not acceptable.”

The Treadmill at Work

David Seamands tells of a woman named Margaret who as an adult displayed outbursts of anger and depression that were ruining her marriage. When he began helping her, he found that she was being controlled by an internal voice from the past – the voice of her perfectionist mother who was never quite satisfied. And somehow this voice had become the displeased voice of God.

She recalled her first piano recital, and how she wanted to play perfectly so her mom would be happy. So she practiced until her fingers nearly fell off. When the recital came, she performed flawlessly. As she got up from the bench, her piano instructor grabbed her elbow and said, “Excellent, Margaret; you played it perfectly!” But when she took her place next to her mother, her mom leaned over and whispered, “Your slip was showing the whole time.” Now to her God was the Eternal Parent who kept whispering that her slip was showing.

Get Off the Treadmill

Many people never realize or accept that they can get off the treadmill. What can be done to help such people? Unfortunately, our culture is so thoroughly penetrated by the therapeutic model that many think they’re forever tied to the past. Armed with a new vocabulary of words such as dysfunction, dependency, codependency, addiction, and denial (all very helpful with a proper Christian framework), they become victims of the past.

The good news that Christianity offers is that we can get off the treadmill. Through spiritual healing, through Christian guidance or counseling, and through a renewed understanding of God, we can be delivered from such deadly treadmill theology.

In [Titus 3:3](#), Paul explains why we'll never be able to play the treadmill game well enough: "At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another." Because of sin, we can't earn our salvation. Not just specific sins, but SIN – the destructive, pervading power of evil that has captured every person.

Paul, a veteran of "treadmilism," understood all too well how far from God one can be while appearing to be very spiritual. Everyone, he tells us, has chosen to participate in the fallenness of our world, regardless of credentials or prior performance. But then he explains how this gap can be filled. Not by jumping as far as we can. Not by tiptoeing across a high-wire. The gap is filled by a bridge that God, out of his stupendous grace, constructed through the sacrifice of his Son – a bridge in the shape of a cross.

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life ([Titus 3:4-7](#)).

The grace of God fills the pages of both testaments. It is the glue that holds the biblical story together. And that grace has been shown most clearly and powerfully through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are saved not because of our ability to stay on the treadmill but because of what God has done through Jesus. The status of his followers now is that of heirs.

What incredible news! If I die this week, I'll spend eternity with God in heaven. I might be wrong concerning some details about worship or some "issue." But I will still be with God. I might fall short of where I should be in reaching lost people for the Lord. But I'm still saved.

This doesn't deny that there's a response to grace. "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all" ([Titus 2:11](#)). We must respond with obedience, service, sacrifice, and good works, not to win God's approval or to repay him, but to express our thanks to God for his grace and to trust him with the guidance of our lives. We grow in these matters because he loves us, accepts us, forgives us.

Collapse into Kind Arms

In 1793 William Carey, "the father of modern missions," left behind his life in England to go to India. There he invested his life in translating Scripture, organizing evangelistic teams, and teaching others. But at his request his gravestone reads simply:

WILLIAM CAREY
Born August 17th, 1761

Died June, 1834
A wretched, poor
and helpless worm,
On Thy kind arms I fall.

If you are an exhausted Christian, if you're weary of trying to earn your salvation, if you're tired of worrying about being lost, then go ahead and get off the treadmill. And don't worry about falling. The kind arms of God are there to catch you!

The Wright Side: Speeding Tickets

by Chris Altrock
June, 1993

It was just another steamy summer day in Memphis. The clock on the wall said it was a quarter to five, so I grabbed my keys and wallet, and ran out the door. In 15 minutes my wife would be finishing work.

I drove through some side streets and wound my way up to Poplar, one of the main streets that would take me all the way to the two-story brick building where Kendra was working. As I turned onto the six-lane street, I popped in a tape and slid the car into fifth gear, gliding along with the rest of the traffic.

40... 45... 50...

“Hmmm, I wonder what’s going on up there? Must be some construction work – there’s a guy standing in the middle of my lane. What’s he doing? Oh, he’s waving me over. Must be a detour. Wait a minute – construction workers don’t wear black.”

“Oh, no!”

“It’s a cop!”

And one of Memphis’ finest pulled me over to a side street and blocked me with his imposing motorcycle.

“Clocked you doing 52 in a 40-mile-per-hour zone.”

“I didn’t know that it was only 40. You see, I’m sorta new here, only been here a month or so and....”

“Let me see your license.”

“But you see...,” as I pulled out my license.

“Address?”

“Well, it’s like this...,” as I grunted out my address.

“Okay, sign here. Let me tell you how this works. You can pay sixty-one dollars at this address here, or you can pay thirty-four dollars if you want it to go on your record.”

Silently I was begging him for mercy, for some sign of compassion, but none came through his black sunglasses.

“Here you go. Have a nice day.”

Have a nice day? Boy, I couldn't wait to show this to my wife. Thirty-four dollars! And even then it would go on my record.

Several weeks after that incident, I still find myself being overly cautious as I drive the same road to pick up Kendra. I drive it much differently than I used to. Now I let the orange arm of the speedometer barely touch the outer point of 40 and no more. Cars zip past me in the other two lanes, but I don't budge. I drive a very safe 40. I've learned my lesson.

It's interesting to reflect on why I drive the way I do now. Before, I would drive whatever speed everyone else was driving. If they drove 40, so would I. If they drove 50, so would I. Now I just drive 40, period. Do I drive 40 because I have come to sincerely respect the officer's wish for me to drive slower? Probably not. Do I drive 40 because I want to show my love and appreciation for the city of Memphis and the state of Tennessee? Probably not. I drive 40 for one very simple reason: I don't want to get caught again. I can't afford it.

This kind of motivation is easy to understand. It's an attitude of survival. We learn it from the time we are little.

“Don't hit your sister again, or you'll regret it!”

“Remember what happened last time you wouldn't listen to me?”

It's the reason many of us get to work on time in the morning. It's the reason we try to file our income tax returns before that ominous deadline. Over the course of our lives we learn an ever-present rule: *Do bad and get punished; do good and avoid punishment*. Very simple. Very straight-forward. And it works – for a while.

It works until we meet a God who would say goodbye to his only Son. It works until we come face to face with a Savior who is dying to embrace us. It works until we read the bold-face letters on the Deed of Salvation: **Debt Paid in Full**. And a gracious God enforces a different rule.

Do we deserve punishment? You bet. Have we messed up? More than we care to remember. But, do we get punished as if there were no alternative? No. God took care of that side of the equation. On a dark afternoon in Palestine God took care of that.

But some of us still try to live as if he hadn't. Even some of us who follow the Master still live as if we were bound by that shabby human rule. We take care of our neighbor. We read our Bible. We go to church. We talk the talk. But only to avoid punishment. Some of us live our lives like I have learned to drive my car. We obey the “rules” only to avoid fearful punishment. The result? Peace is a running river we try to grasp but can't. Joy is a stranger we have never met. And God is an imposing man behind dark sunglasses, waiting to give speeding tickets. The promise of the Savior that we would find rest for our souls seems to us an empty one.

I think God knows we tend to work that way. Maybe that's why he created an earthly paradise for man and woman before talking about rules. Perhaps that's why he led a band of sandal-shod slaves across a dry sea bed in Egypt before he gave them the Law. Perhaps that's why he met death before meeting you and me. Not to butter us up. Not to make us feel obligated. But to make us feel loved. To help us see that no matter what we may have done in the past, he can secure our future.

Paul's summary of the work of the Incarnate says it best: "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). Christianity is not desperate deeds done by one to avoid the wrath of a fiery God. It is the natural acts of love that come from one who deserves nothing but has been given everything. With the exclamation point of the cross, God has called us. Not to condemn our past and make the present a joyless burden, but to secure our future and make the present abundantly joyful.

Baptism: A Grave Response to Grace

by Rick Atchley
June, 1993

Recently two visitors came to my office unexpectedly and asked for some time with me. Immediately it was clear that they were there to question my loyalty to truth and sound doctrine. It seems their chief concern was my association and friendship with another preacher who, as they put it, teaches “you are saved by grace only.” I told them I could only speak for myself, but if the charge was believing that salvation was by grace instead of works, then I was guilty. Their response intrigued me. “Then,” they asked, “you don’t believe that baptism is necessary, do you?” “I most certainly do,” I replied, “and for that matter, so does my friend. And if you would go spend some time with him, perhaps you would be slower to listen to his critics.”

It was clear that these two brothers and I had very different perspectives on the relationship of baptism to God’s grace. And it is this misunderstood relationship between baptism and grace that lies behind most of the controversy concerning the importance of baptism. I believe the words of Jesus can make the matter clear, but first let’s consider the words most often used by men.

WHAT MEN SAY

Perhaps the most common view I hear in the religious community is: “*Baptism is important but not necessary.*” Those who hold this view do not question the necessity of belief and repentance in the salvation process. Yet, though the New Testament knows no such thing as an unbaptized Christian, they insist baptism has no role in the process. Their concern is that such a view would violate the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith.

This view is opposed by another which says: “*Baptism is necessary because faith is not enough.*” Those who think this way are trying to honor the many New Testament passages that link baptism to a change in the sinner’s state. Their conclusion is that God did his part to make salvation possible, and now man must do his part to complete the process. They tend to view man’s part as a series of steps, with faith being one of the first steps and baptism usually being the last.

The first group turns to [Ephesians 2](#) for support: “It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – not by works.” The second group turns to [James](#) for ammunition: “Faith without works is dead.” Both groups say some things that need to be heard. But I believe both views are wrong.

WHAT JESUS SAID

When considering any matter, the first thing Christians should do is hear what Jesus has to say. This is especially true when it comes to the question of baptism. It is my belief that the example and words of Christ could clear up much of the confusion.

The place to begin is with Jesus' baptism (see [Matthew 3:13-17](#)). John had predicted that Christ would come as a baptizer, so he is surprised when Jesus comes to receive baptism. His reaction to the request of Jesus tells the reader that, unlike all the rest who received John's baptism, Jesus did not come seeking forgiveness of sins.

So why was Jesus baptized? Several of the possible reasons which have been suggested have merit. It is interesting to note that Jesus often used the term "baptism" as a metaphor for his own death ([Luke 12:50](#); [Mark 10:38-39](#)). This implies that one reason Jesus was baptized was to demonstrate his willingness to accept the costly mission on which his Father had sent him. In a sense, his baptism was the beginning of his death, the first visible indication of the radical quality of his servant-hood.

But the bottom line is that Jesus was baptized *to obey God*. When John questioned his need for baptism, Jesus replied, "It is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." ([Matthew 3:15](#)). Another version puts it, "We should do all things that are right." (ERV) Still another says, "We do well to conform in this way with all that God requires"(NEB). What was right for Jesus was to obey God by seeking out John and being baptized. And the reaction of heaven as Jesus came up out of the water makes it clear that God was pleased with this fulfilling of his will.

I believe the Christian community should spend more time with this incident from the life of Jesus when discussing the importance of baptism. Behind every believer's baptism is the baptism of Jesus.

Next we notice that baptism has a significant place not just at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, but at the end as well (see [Matthew 28:18-20](#)). In Matthew's record of the last words of Jesus to the church, Jesus instructed his followers to make disciples all over the world by baptizing them into the name of the Triune God and instructing them to follow Jesus' teachings. "Into the name" was a technical term from the world of commerce that indicated entry into an account. The idea is that at baptism one is united with the Godhead in an ownership relationship. To put it another way, at baptism the believer comes under new management.

So baptizing is part of the final marching orders of Jesus to the church. He makes it an indispensable part of the "making disciples" process. Does this not challenge the view that baptism is important but not necessary? How could Jesus' example and command make baptism optional for the believer? Isn't obeying the one you call "Lord" always necessary? Jesus said, "If you love me, you will obey what I command" ([John 14-15](#)). The Scriptures give many reasons why baptism is essential for the believer, but all we really need to know is this: Jesus was baptized to obey God, and Jesus commands that all who would be disciples be baptized. His example and his words ought to be all the motivation anyone needs.

The view that baptism is important but not necessary simply isn't congruent with the life and teachings of Jesus. But does that legitimize the view that works do play a role in our salvation? Is Jesus saying that baptism is necessary because faith is not enough? Again, the Gospels answer that question.

In Mark's account of Jesus' final marching orders, we read these words: "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" ([Mark 16:15-16](#)). (I am aware of the textual problems concerning the long ending of Mark. However, these words, if not the actual utterance of Jesus, do reflect the understanding of the early church concerning the teaching of Jesus.) Now we need to distinguish between "gospel" and "baptism." Belief and baptism are not the gospel, but how one responds to the gospel. Only after one understands the gospel that Paul summarizes in [1 Corinthians 15:1-4](#) can he be rightly challenged to make the proper response.

But what is important for our purpose in this passage is the close connection between faith and baptism. The construction will not allow either to claim more importance than the other. The idea is that the efficacy of baptism presupposes the presence of faith. Indeed the negative clause indicates that without faith one would never even consider baptism. There is no description here of baptism as an additional step that is added to faith. The idea instead is that baptism is an expression of faith in the gospel of Jesus. A person will either do both – believe and be baptized – or do neither, but not do one without the other. This is why, as the renowned Baptist scholar Beasley-Murray has noted, all the gifts of grace promised to faith in the New Testament are also promised to baptism. Baptism is a declaration of faith in the gospel.

This is also affirmed in the fourth Gospel. In [John 3:3-5](#) Jesus tells Nicodemus of the necessity of the new birth of water and the Spirit. When one considers the baptism of Jesus, the promise of John, and the words of Peter and Paul, it becomes obvious why the first Christians understood this water-Spirit rebirth to refer to baptism. But we must not just stop at verse five when preaching on this text. Reading on, we once again notice how Jesus connects baptism to faith.

He tells Nicodemus, "I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven – the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" ([John 3:12-15](#)).

Just after saying "you must be born again to enter the kingdom of God," Jesus says, "everyone who believes in me may have eternal life." Jesus consistently taught the sufficiency of faith for salvation. In fact, the next few verses in John 3 make that very point: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son" ([John 3:16-18](#)).

The Gospels allow no room for the view that "faith is not enough." At the same time, the Gospels teach the necessity of baptism. How can this be? Again, the answer is in understanding Jesus' view of baptism. He did not see baptism as a work that must be added to faith in the gospel. Rather, Jesus taught that *baptism is a faith response to the gospel*.

Nowhere in the New Testament is the word “work” ever associated with baptism. Yet it is only reasonable that men must do something in response to the gospel. In fact, they must do a work! But what does Jesus say that work is?

“Then they asked him, ‘What must we do to do the works God requires?’” Jesus answered, ‘The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent’” ([John 6:28-29](#)).

We must do something to receive God’s gracious offer of salvation, but whatever we do must in no way be seen as earning our salvation. “By grace through faith” teaches human responsibility without in any way suggesting that God can be obligated. And Jesus says baptism is one way that faith is manifested. Baptism is an expression of faith, not an addition to it. As Paul puts it in [Colossians 2:12](#), in baptism we are buried and raised with Christ through our faith in the power of God.

We see this principle illustrated in the conversion of the Philippian jailer. When he asked Paul what he must do to be saved, he was told, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” ([Acts 16:31](#)). There is no need to treat that answer like it is not sufficient. It does not need to be “amplified.” Just keep reading the story. It says Paul told the jailer and his family about the gospel of Jesus, and immediately they were all baptized. Why? Because that is how believing in the Lord Jesus is expressed. As Luke puts it, “the whole family was filled with joy, because they had come to believe in God” (v. 34).

It is extremely ironic to me that some consider the preaching of salvation by grace as undermining the place of baptism. We do not have to choose between [Acts 2](#) and [Ephesians 2](#) when preaching the gospel. “Repent and be baptized” does not contradict “it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – not by works”; the former endorses the latter.

Have you ever considered how passive one is in baptism? Is it not something done to you? In baptism, Jesus is the actor and you are the participant. Nothing is earned. Everything is given. Baptism is a sublime faith statement that I am not relying on my own efforts for salvation, but trusting instead in the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is my way of declaring “Nothing in my hands I bring; simply to the cross I cling.” Baptism does not contradict salvation by grace; it declares that salvation can be received in no other way!

I think that is one reason Satan attempts to diminish the place of baptism in the Christian community. Satan can tolerate a lot of what churches do or say as long as the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus are left out. But baptism won’t let us forget the gospel. In baptism the believer declares faith in the most important events of history, and the gospel is preached all over again. It is a grave response to the grace of God.

When we listen to Jesus, we do not view baptism as an option. When we listen to Jesus, we do not view salvation as faith plus works. When we listen to Jesus, we hear a gospel of grace that can be received in submissive faith through a new birth of water and the Spirit.

Dead Men Don't Climb Ladders

*by Roy Osborne
June, 1993*

In every discipline there are what might be called, “generally accepted mistakes.” These are things which the general populace seems to accept as true, but are not. Many people believe certain quotes are from the Bible, when actually they come from Shakespeare, Chaucer, Milton, Benjamin Franklin, or others. “Cleanliness is next to godliness” is not, as many believe, a quote from the Bible, but from an old rabbi by the name of Phineas ben Yair, and quoted in a sermon by John Wesley.

The average man in the street believes that keeping the Ten Commandments is a sure way to justification before God. Some form of this erroneous belief lies at the base of most religious philosophy today. This is surely one of the most popular “generally accepted mistakes.”

We seem unable to give up the idea that we must DO SOMETHING to effect our justification. Some of the most prominent preachers, in and out of the Church of Christ, teach justification as a cooperative effort on the part of God and man. Man does all he can and God supplies the rest. Man climbs the ladder as far as he can go, and God reaches down the rest of the way to save him.

The fallacy of this should be evident to all who read Paul's words in Ephesians 2: “God... made us alive with Christ, even when we were DEAD in transgressions... it is by grace you have been saved...” **DEAD MEN DON'T CLIMB LADDERS!** Those who are dead cannot contribute **anything** to the process.

The late K. C. Moser (a giant in biblical understanding) said, “One of the most difficult truths for man to accept is that he has a real Savior. He desires that Jesus **tell him what to do to save himself!** It is astonishing how many and who they are who have such an idea.”

We seem to feel that there is a certain piety in working to be holy; a certain personal need fulfilled when I “clean up my act,” and decide to be a good boy or girl. The prophet, who described his righteous acts as “filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6), understood the personal egotism which mars self-achieved goodness. No wonder Paul, in the Ephesian passage referred to above, said, “... not of works, lest any man should boast.”

The preaching of justification totally by God's grace does not relieve man of all responsibility, as some seem to fear. It is not an antinomian philosophy, which leaves the subject free to do as he pleases, or to do nothing at all. The opposite of works salvation is not freedom from obedience, but **TOTAL** dependence on the Lord. It is not freedom from acting rightly, but freedom from self-reliance. The acceptance, by faith, of God's grace, transforms me into a new creature, whose purpose and meaning of life are defined by the Lord.

The baptism of John was inadequate because it was a baptism of repentance, leaving the burden still on the shoulders of the sinner to correct his mistakes and live righteously. The baptism of

Christ takes the burden off the one who **cannot bear it**, and surrenders it to the one who **can**. Your were DEAD in your sins, and “DEAD MEN DON’T CLIMB LADDERS.”

It is no wonder we do not find peace, nor answers to the myriad problems of life. Paul, in Romans 5, says, “having been justified by faith let us have peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ.” I can never find peace as long as I strive for personal righteousness. I must always live with the fear that there is more I should know, and more I should correct and more I should do. Total faith is total surrender to him, and every step is accompanied by the aura of his felt presence. What I do I do with the overwhelming sense of his presence in my life, not judging my righteousness but forgiving my unrighteousness.

There have always been those who were uncomfortable with not knowing. Even the disciples of Jesus many times asked him to reveal some mystery to them. His answer was “it is not for you to know...,’ depend on me.

Job longed to understand the mystery of his life and its terrible problems. But God gave him no answers. It was as if God said to him, “Job, I don’t need you smart. I don’t need you to understand me or explain me. I just want you to have complete faith in me.”

To depend on my personal understanding and logic is to reduce God to a level I can understand. It removes the supernatural from my religion. It makes God no greater than the scope of my limited mind’s capacity. The older I get the more I want a God I don’t understand. If he is not greater than my understanding he is not great enough to run my world, which I don’t understand and cannot control.

It was not an accidental trick of literary style that caused Jesus to introduce the first great sermon he preached (Matthew 5) with a call for complete humility. Only the “poor in spirit” (and I am told the word for poor in the original language means having nothing at all) are capable of **total** surrender to him who is the **total** Savior.

The belief that I must “climb the ladder” as far as I can and God will reach the rest of the way, leaves my faith as nothing more than a motivator to the actions which justify me. This denies faith as being of any value on its own... the spiritual connection I have with a very personal Savior and a very loving Father. Given this “incidental” role of motivator, my faith cannot help me when the troubles of life overwhelm and the dark hours come. If it only motivates me to act, and the only justification is in the action, I am removed from the comfort of the Savior by the weak failures in my personal actions. No wonder so many go to church for comfort, but leave with only an increased sense of guilt.

The acceptance of God’s grace and the shed blood of Jesus Christ as the total cause of my justification, does not allow me a permissive religion. On the contrary, when I totally surrender to Jesus Christ (as Lord of my life) I, by faith, open myself to the transforming power of his Spirit, which makes of me a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:27). This new creature takes its meaning and direction from Jesus Christ, for there is no other source of light. Human logic and complete understanding are not necessary to one who simply wishes to imitate Christ. As Peter said, “To whom shall we go, Lord, you have the words of eternal life.”

God did not confuse the language of the Babel tower builders to keep them from succeeding in their attempt to climb up to heaven. He stopped them to impress upon them the foolishness of the quest, and their own helplessness. Physical mortals do not climb to spiritual heights with earth-bound tools. Neither do men, who are dead in sin, perform acts of righteousness, with sin-broken tools. Christianity is not a religion of achievement but of submission. DEAD MEN DON'T CLIMB LADDERS!

God's Fearsome Grace

by Randall J. Harris
June, 1993

There is a perception frequently shared with me that many of us have a certain fear of the doctrine of grace. While undoubtedly overstated, upon reflection I have concluded that there is some truth to this observation. But it may come as a surprise to some to learn that I think this apprehension is at least partially well-founded.

This legitimate fear is articulated by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*: "CHEAP GRACE is the deadly enemy of our Church.... Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline; Communion without confession.... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ...."

Bonhoeffer's description of "cheap grace" is particularly striking since it was written over 50 years ago in Germany rather than in American churches of the 1990s. But we shouldn't be surprised that in every time and place there is always a lurking threat that a misunderstanding of grace may lead away from the demands of discipleship.

The apostle Paul himself was aware of the possible misinterpretation of his teaching: "What then are we to do? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?" ([Romans 6:1-2](#)).

This is not a matter to be taken lightly. The teaching of grace separated from the call to discipleship leads to distortions in doctrine and life of which neither Jesus nor Paul would approve.

However, giving all due respect to the legitimate concerns expressed above, I am convinced that there is a reticence about grace that represents genuine theological problems. All of these problems are rooted in a failure to trust God's love and mercy as the source of transformation and salvation. I will briefly point out three such problems:

1) Control. We sometimes find it hard to believe God's grace will transform people's hearts, and, without having faith in that process we may feel the need to help God along by exercising control over their behavior. This, in turn, leads us to a practical theology which at a theoretical level we would never espouse. Let me illustrate:

I know of no one who contends that Wednesday night services are an indispensable part of one's service to God. But once having made the decision to have such services, we are not at all sure God will create the desire of heart for everyone to participate. So we come to depict this as a mandatory part of right standing before God. Having entered into this cycle we then fear what will happen to our attendance, contribution, and programs if our people are given the idea that certain matters are not compulsory for salvation. By this procedure, we show that we do not trust

God's love and grace to lead us into richer, fuller service than guilt-producing authoritarianism ever could.

2) Human Nature. A good deal of our uneasiness about grace may reflect a mistaken understanding of the doctrine of human nature. In American society which emphasizes achievement and independence, we are led to believe that through hard work we can accomplish anything. This is sometimes not so subtly brought over to the spiritual realm. To know that before God, when all of my achievement in behalf of the kingdom are added up, the sum total is that of an unprofitable servant, I am filled with dread in the face of God's relentless holiness.

In the study of historical theology, I have come to see over and over again that there is a close correlation between the doctrines of grace and human nature. The most profound views of God's grace are consistently associated with the lowest views of human nature. A higher estimate of human ability invariably leads to less dependence on grace.

We may be reluctant to affirm God's grace in the deepest sense because of what it says about us. We are not sure we want to stand before God with the real sinners (prostitutes, thieves, murderers, etc.). Although we do not directly state it, we still want, at least partially, to stand before God based on our own righteousness and then let his grace make up what is lacking. Might our apparent disagreements about grace really be disagreements about human nature?

3) Relationship. But surely the most profound aspect of our reluctance about grace is our fear of the "blank check" as opposed to the carefully spelled-out contract. In the eloquence of Michel Quoists's Prayers,
*I am afraid of saying "Yes," Lord
Where will you take me?
I am afraid of drawing the longer straw,
I am afraid of signing my name to an unread agreement,
I am afraid of the "yes" that entails other "yesses."*

The demands of law may be heavy, but they are predictable. But what of love's demands? In our relationship with our families we give far beyond our legal responsibilities. When our approach to God becomes relational and based in the relentless divine love that cherishes even the unlovable sinner, there is no limit on where we may be led. And that can be unsettling or even terrifying.

God's relentless love that pursues us and then demands our all can be a fearsome thing. To be so indebted to God that nothing can repay it strikes us with awe. How shall we respond? Hear Quoist again:

*Lord, I am afraid of your demands, but who can resist you?
That your kingdom may come and not mine,
That your will may be done and not mine,
Help me to say "Yes."*

The Eclipse of Worship and Evangelism – Part 2

*by Andre Resner
June, 1993*

The Danger of Reductionism

Perhaps the greatest issue at stake in the eclipse of worship and evangelism by their collapse together is one of the most insidious: reductionism. The reduction is noxious enough to encompass both the nature of worship and evangelism. By collapsing the stages of religious conversion into a religious “one night stand,” and evicting the traditional worship of the church to make room for the pragmatic “make the most of every opportunity” evangelistic service, both evangelism and worship become loosed from the biblical, historical, and theological infrastructure, and if not lost altogether, seriously impaired.

It remains important for conservative churches to biblically justify what they do. In the case of justifying church growth methodology, Carl Holladay has shown that the modern church growth theorists, in their quest to provide biblical rationales for their modern methodologies, have been guilty of a “special pleading” in the use of New Testament texts. Uncritical sifting and organizing of a litany of texts causes such statements as this from Donald McGavran: “The New Testament is a series of Church Growth documents. The Gospels, the book of Acts, and the Epistles were written by missionaries for mission. These were written by Church Growth people to Church Growth people [sort of puts a twist on Paul’s ‘from faith to faith’] to help the church grow”¹

Holladay goes on to illustrate from a more judicious reading of the New Testament documents that there is by no means a singular understanding of “church growth” in the texts themselves. Holladay shows well that the contemporary concern for church growth does not really find a specific taproot in the New Testament. He alludes to the fact that the gospel may, even in its evangelistic form, serve both a fueling and critiquing function in the church’s mission.² The gospel fuels the mission of the spread of the message, but it also stands over against the church in its formulation of both message and method. This critiquing function of the gospel itself on its promulgation by the church has remained an unexplored topic by the church growth theorists and their children in both the “mega” and “meta” church phenomena.

Placing Evangelism in its Theological Framework

William J. Abraham has done the church a great service in his *The Logic of Evangelism*. After critiquing views of evangelism which reduce it either to “proclamation”³ or “church growth,”⁴ Abraham goes on to place evangelism within the context of the eschatological Kingdom of God. Placed in this context, evangelism is to be defined not narrowly as simply “soul-winning,” shared testimony of one to another, or making disciples. These all focus on one facet of evangelism and attempt to make that one facet the center or essence of what evangelism is supposed to be. Rather, evangelism which takes its basis from the biblical and theological witness is to be understood as “that set of intentional activities which is governed by the goal of initiating people

into the Kingdom of God for the first time.”⁵ This is to do nothing less than shift the focus of what we are doing and thinking about evangelism from a focus on humanity to a focus on God; it is a shift from an anthropological to a theological starting point. Pragmatism suffers a withering fate under the intense gaze of such a shift of focus.

We begin by asking what it is to be initiated into the rule of God, which has been inaugurated in Jesus of Nazareth and in the work of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and thereafter... this takes the primary focus away from external admittance into a particular organization and relocates it in the sweep of God’s action in Christ... We shift from an anthropocentric horizon, where the focus is on what we do or on what is done to us... we move to a theocentric horizon where the focus is on the majestic and awesome activity of a Trinitarian God whose actions on our behalf stagger our imagination and dissolve into impenetrable mystery.⁶

With this focus removed from ourselves and placed on God’s inbreaking, now-but-not-yet Kingdom, we see that evangelism’s place is “to see people firmly grounded in that rule so that they can begin a new life as agents of reconciliation, compassion, and peace.”⁷ The initiation into God’s rule is thus to be seen as unique in contrast to any other institution in the world. Even though the sociologist, psychologist, or anthropologist may be able to identify within the process of conversion certain processes which could be extracted, “understood and mastered,” such extraction is reductive and manipulative.

To repeat, the activities of the church are unique. They are not simply something the world might do, but with the label “Christian” appended. This being the case the insights from the human and social sciences, through by no means neglected in the church’s work in the world, are not allowed to become the dominant voice in the theological conversation. What worship and evangelism are, and how they are done, are determinative for how they are related to one another.

Evangelism, defined as we are attempting here, is rescued from the shrunken “one-night-stand” experience and is understood “polymorphously as any activity governed by the intention to initiate people into the Kingdom of God.”⁸ “Any activity” is perhaps an unfortunate phrasing, and must be understood within Abraham’s larger argument. He certainly does not mean this in a pragmatic sense. “Any activity” highlights the difficulty of reducing the many-varied activities of evangelism down to generic techniques or programmable methods.

A position such as Abraham’s on the nature of evangelism complicates the contemporary situation in America almost guaranteeing that Abraham’s views will not be popular. This is because on the American religious scene what sells is what is simple and authoritative. Ambiguity and mystery don’t “work” well in a culture which deifies the “Popeil” approach to gaining adherents to one’s product. The marketing concerns of the American church would have us take the mystery of the gospel and package it in a way that its distributors can easily peddle and the consumers can easily purchase. Thus, rather than retaining the biblical picture of people entering a great mystery that they will never quite have a purely cognitive handle on, we have the contemporary picture of people reducing the mystery to a commodity of social exchange. The life in Christ is a mystery to be lived in, not simply a set of propositions to be memorized.

Popularity, though, is not Abraham's true concern, and neither is it the primary concern of the gospel. Even a cursory review of Jesus' ministry in the Gospels and of Paul's through his letters reminds us that the gospel of Jesus Christ is not inherently commercial, nor can it be forced into a popular format in order to be more attractive, more "successful," or so that it will "work" better. Paul Tillich's words are still instructive here:

We are asking: How do we make the message heard and seen, and then either rejected or accepted? The question cannot be: How do we communicate the Gospel so that others will accept it? For this there is no method. To communicate the Gospel means putting it before the people so that they are able to decide for or against it. The Christian Gospel is a matter of decision. It is to be accepted or rejected. All that we who communicate this Gospel can do is to make possible a genuine decision.⁹

Tillich goes on to conclude that there is a genuine stumbling block to the gospel that cannot be removed without something of the nature of the gospel itself being removed. If the gospel is intentionally cut and shaped so as to achieve numerical growth (for whatever reasons!) a sacrificing of the integrity of the message, of the inherent infrastructure of the Kingdom of God has taken place, and we might well exclaim with Paul, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!" ([Galatians 1:6-8](#)). Paul was unequivocal in his critique of those who would make the gospel a commodity for the open market (e.g., [2 Corinthians 2:17](#); [1 Thessalonians 2:3ff](#)). In fact, he went so far as to make claims for his own role in evangelism and ministry that the church has often wished he had not. "I thank God that I baptized none of you....For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel..." ([1 Corinthians 1:14](#)).

Tillich describes two kinds of stumbling blocks: (1) those of our own construction and, (2) that which is genuinely inherent to the message of the gospel. The danger of reductionism in evangelism is the exchanging of stumbling blocks, our placing one of our own production, whether it be one of method or personality or whatever. Such an exchange of the "scandal" does not allow the confronted to make a genuine decision for or against the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

The cost of a reduced gospel is too high. It can only result in a reduced worship of the Holy God, a reduced community life (while often ironically creating a larger community, numerically speaking), a reduced presence of justice in the world, and a reduced spirit of compassion among the broken.

The third and final part to this series will explore more closely the relationship of worship and evangelism with the hope of recovering each on its own terms.

1D. A. McGavran and W. C. Arn, *Ten Steps for Church Growth* New York: Harper and Row, 1977) 24. As quoted by C. R. Holladay, "Church Growth in the New Testament: Some Historical Considerations and Theological Perspectives," *Restoration Quarterly* 26 (1983) 86.

2 Holladay, "Church Growth," 94-95.

3 He suggests that the influence of revivalism reduced the notion of evangelism to simply proclamation. See *Logic*, pp. 40ff.

4 Abraham maintains that a fierce pragmatism which relies primarily on sociological, anthropological, and psychological data for its means and methods inordinately pilots the church growth "strategist" in his/her theological decisions. "What I wish to argue is that both our conception of numerical growth and our practical operations to achieve this end must, logically speaking, be governed by the kind of crucial theological concepts that are either ignored or hopelessly diluted in the church growth tradition" (*Logic*, p. 82). See *Logic*, pp. 70ff.

5 Abraham, *Logic*, p. 95.

6 Abraham, *Logic*, p. 98.

7 *Logic*, p. 101.

8 *Logic*, p. 212. This understanding of the church's mission extends to its worship and its educational life. The theological grounding of the Kingdom of God sets our agenda. John Westerhoff III has stated that "Jesus taught us the way of perceiving reality (faith), God's way of relating to us (revelation), and how to act personally and socially in the world (vocation). The aim of Christian education is to do likewise so that the church as the body of Christ might continue to transform culture. As such the church is judged by the degree to which it becomes a sign and witness in the world to the reign of God." [See *Social Themes of the Christian Year*, edited by D. T. Hessel (Philadelphia: The Geneva Press, 1983) 19.]

9 *Theology of Culture*, edited by R. C. Kimball (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959) 201. One is reminded here of the apropos words of Marcus Barth: "The only method of 'preparation for the evangel of peace' (Ephesians 6:15) and for the corresponding evangelism is not a study of 'methods of evangelism,' but an acquaintance with the Gospel itself." *The Broken Wall* (Chicago: The Judson Press, 1959) 27.

Out of the Mouths of Babes

by Don Dobbins
July, 1993

My three-year-old niece does not yet subscribe to the principle of cause and effect. She plays with all the gusto she can muster; she plays hard with or without her Nikes on. Unfortunately, she often falls and scratches her little feet, legs, hands, arms, head, and face. Although she especially enjoys playing with her kitten, Pierre, she doesn't yet understand that love for others sometimes requires restraint, and Pierre is forced on occasion to scratch and bite her in self-defense. Well, the other day, in an intense moment of self-examination, my niece said to me, "You know what Uncle Don? I have a lot of boo-boos!"

My niece can barely spell her name, and yet, she has taught me three life-changing lessons: *the need for self-love, the need for self-restraint, and the need for self-examination*. I'm convinced that Rachael is only the messenger of these axioms while Jesus is their author.

When we came into this world, we were the center of our universe. We were very much in tune with what our needs were, and we did all that was within our power to guarantee that they were met. Instinctively, and without guilt, we loved ourselves and considered ourselves worthy of life. Life was fun; it was filled with fairy tales and games.

Yes, we occasionally sensed that our parents were not always happy-go-lucky, that they worried about things that we couldn't understand. But we were convinced that everything would be okay, they loved us, we loved them. Most of all, though, we loved ourselves. Small wonder Jesus loved to be around children!

As you know, fantasyland did not last forever, even in the best families. During the stormy adolescent years we became fire-walkers over the sizzling coals of self-doubt and skepticism. We became lost in the universe. We could no longer locate a self to love. Our fairy tales became nightmares. Our once trustworthy bodies changed before our very eyes. Our ability to rationalize developed. We wanted to retreat, but there was no shelter. When possible, we held hands with kindred spirits. Our parents seemingly betrayed our interests and our mouths were quick with daggers and spears meant to inflict mortal wounds. We became acquainted, and sometimes consumed, with the super-glue of guilt. It seemed to bond to our very souls.

Many of us learned unique ways to distract our thinking from the pain, but it set up permanent residence anyway. Our frail containers of consciousness became the battlefield between good and evil, God and Satan, and life and death. Our mortality became a real possibility so we learned the dangerous art of denial. Our once glorious fountains of self-love spouted forth a poison of self-confusion. In the coolness of the predawn, we learned to hate self. Self could not be controlled and its vileness nauseated us.

"My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?," we cried. Some of us, we know not how exactly, came to realize that he was always there. At first we feared the footsteps in the sand. In

time we discerned whose they were and allowed him to carry us through. We allowed him to forgive us. We put on white robes. We rejoiced! We were saddened by the majority of our kindred spirits who built their homes on the foundation of false hopes. But, thank God, we made it!

Or Did We?

Are we fallaciously concluding that since we are adults, that we made it through the storm without permanent damage? Did we? Did you? Are you confusing the physical signs of adulthood, namely, chronological age, with the truly defining characteristic of adulthood, i.e., emotional maturity? Did you? Have you? Are you loving and forgiving yourself? Do you love you? Are you watching out for your needs? I didn't say wants, or desires. I mean: are you taking care of you?

Many of us are making the journey through life while hauling the cumbersome luggage of self-hatred. Oh yeah, we know (rationally, at least) that God loves us, we know our family loves us, but deep down we despise ourselves! We are void of life. We know we need help, but we choose to punish ourselves in silence.

My self-hatred cost me plenty. I lost a marriage, a career, a sanity, a fellowship, and eventually the odds are that I will lose my life due to complications of HIV disease. Months upon months of suicidal depression pushed me to take near fatal risks. I hated me. I wanted to die. I wanted to cease to exist.

Trust me, you must learn to love yourself before it is too late. Rejoice in God's love and forgiveness, but don't stop there. Love yourself! Forgive yourself! "Love your neighbor as yourself" are the words Jesus used to express this idea. YOU are worthy of life!

Self-love will bring an important realization: the need for self-restraint. At just three years of age, my niece has already discovered that she must occasionally use restraint in her actions. She stays away from fire and she knows not to play in traffic. She is also becoming quite adept at pushing her mother just to the breaking point, and then restraining from further badgering, a ploy that often yields the desired result.

Of course, she still must receive discipline from the adults in her life, but isn't the goal of parental discipline to produce self-discipline?

We live in a world where our every desire can be satisfied immediately. Surely Epicurus would feel at home. Some of us are like laboratory mice who will ingest cocaine into their system until they die, despite the fact that they have the option of food and water. In our distorted way of thinking, we indulge ourselves in our pleasures of choice until our senses are dulled and our life is ruined. Why? Because where there is no self-love, there is little, if any, self-restraint.

Though my initial reasons were somewhat different than the great Solomon, in ignorance I embarked on a similar journey. Just as he, in his earthly wisdom, allowed himself excess in every worldly pleasure, so I too, denied myself nothing. I came to believe that self-restraint should be

abolished. Because the right amount of alcohol distracted me from the pain of living, I drank to excess. Many mornings, and some afternoons, I awoke with a self-induced amnesia; I wondered how I had made it home from the bar the night before. I can still recall several nights when I would have to stop my motorcycle every couple of miles to throw up my dignity. I hated my existence.

I bought myself into financial oblivion. I skipped from job to job, sometimes working less than a full day before quitting. I created a false reality by lying to myself and others. I outran Jonah with an occultic footspeed fueled by the winds of hell. I had no control. I wanted no control.

Sex games offered the pay-off of emotionally destructive power. I did not love or understand the women I slept with; I used them! We mindlessly choreographed a continuation of the self-hatred behaviors that were sucking life from our bodies. We used each other out of a disillusioned need to hide from the pain.

The woman from whom I contracted the virus told me prior to our sexual relationship that she was infected. My response was, "So what!" You see, I wanted to die. A few months later, when I received the letter from the blood bank informing me of something I already suspected, I crumpled it into a ball, threw it into the garbage can, and went out to perform my stand-up comedy act at a local bar. Without self-restraint I was a man of tortured extremes.

How about you? Is moderation a four-letter word to you? You can easily deceive others, but you have to live and die with yourself. God knows; he's omniscient, but he can't force you to change. What is your pleasure of choice? Is it killing you? Although as Christians you are free, a poet reminded us in a song that, "freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose." I've yet to meet anyone with *nothing* left to lose.

I suspect that all of those reading this article are God-fearing at some level. We have that down pat. This isn't the problem. Indeed, the problem is that we are not self-fearing. Underneath our white robes lives a soldier of Satan waiting for the right opportunity to self-destruct. Have you crucified your former self as Paul urges in his letter to the Ephesians? It is possible for the former self to be raised from the grave. Do you love yourself enough to hammer shut the coffin of self-hatred? Are you practicing self-restraint?

Until a recent move, I lived in a small, rural, and educationally impoverished community. Because I was active in trying to get an AIDS curriculum in the school system, I had the opportunity to speak to dozens of individuals who were quick to hurl a judgmental attitude at me. Some of you, doubtless, are thinking to yourself that such a tragedy could never befall you. In all sincerity, my friends, I pray to Almighty God that you are never faced with such a situation. But I encourage you, no, I plead with you, that just as my niece from time to time takes the opportunity to examine her boo-boos, that you also make frequent self-examinations. It may save your life and soul. "Wherefore, let him that thinks he stands, take heed lest he fall."

I am firmly convinced that self-hatred is more powerful in its destructive force than any man-made weapon. Without self-examination, it is an unexploded bomb waiting for the golden moment it can detonate.

Upon its detonation, self-restraint is the first casualty. Please don't delude yourself. Take a trip into the labyrinth of your soul and root out any self-hatred sneaking about. Practice self-restraint because you are worthy of life. Live!

Had it not been for a brutally honest self-examination of life just a few months ago, I would probably not be alive today. I am learning to love *me*. I know, sadly, from personal experience, that a lack of self-control is a sign of self-hatred. I examine and change myself daily.

Transition: Where's it Taking Us?

by Gordon A. Rampy
June, 1993

The present dilemma calls for new objectivity as we search the Scriptures. There's no doubt about it. We in the Churches of Christ have become preoccupied with the practice and politics of change. Many of us who are older would like to close our eyes and ears and shut out all the articles, sermons, tapes, and videos telling us we must adapt, adapt, adapt. We would like to hold on to the formal, the traditional, the "comfortable." But the fact remains, change is upon us, whether we like it or not, and it is forcing us toward a face-to-face confrontation with the difficult, and seldom addressed questions: "What really characterizes a citizen of God's kingdom? Who is or is not included?"

Until recently, most members of my generation could give some pretty simple answers to those questions, answers which included the listing of a person's post-conversion worship practices. Some deviation from the required position was allowed under the label "erring Christian," a term which applied to anyone who wasn't doing things exactly our way after being immersed into Christ for the remission of sins. We were very sure of our doctrine, not very sure of our salvation.

But today, the only available source for God's answer to the question of citizenship, his inspired Word, is being read and studied and taught with more openness of mind and objectivity. The questioning spirit of our culture has turned us into modern Bereans, more determined than ever to replace tradition with sound biblical truth.

Modern (forgive the expression) scholarship, biblical archaeology, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the advent of more readable and accurate versions such as the New International, are allowing us to open the window on the time of the apostles and to see their message in a far clearer historical context. And the more we are able to transport ourselves out of our own culture and into theirs, the less we are burdened by 1,000 years of opinion and prejudice.

As we approach the New Testament in a fresh search for truth, we can see it divided into three chronologically distinct sections dealing with the announcement, establishment and nurturing of the Kingdom. First are the four Gospels, in which we find Christ's teachings and interactions with the Jewish population, activities which served to announce that the long-awaited Kingdom of God had arrived, and that through Jesus alone, entry into that Kingdom (salvation) would now be possible.

Next in order is the Book of Acts which deals with the establishment of the Kingdom. It details the conflicts which took place as the Holy Spirit revealed that the Kingdom actually superseded Judaism and that membership in God's family did not require that one first become a Jew. The author (Luke) is clearly writing this account to assure the Gentile Christian, Theophilus, that the gospel he had received from Paul was indeed backed by the authority of the Holy Spirit, contrary

to anything he may have heard from the “Judaizers.” Thus Luke’s objective was to establish Paul’s credentials as an apostle of Christ.

The third and final section of the New Testament consists of the epistles, 11 letters written to individuals and churches who had already accepted the gospel of Christ and become citizens of the Kingdom, but needed authoritative guidance and nurturing in spiritual matters.

Glaringly absent from the compendium we call The New Testament is the “rule book” we would like to find there, or failing that, to make of it. And yet it is complete. It contains everything we need for salvation. There is no other source. Since it makes no claim to be a rule book, we have a responsibility to avoid treating it like one, and instead to approach it as a letter from a loving Creator who wants us to live with him in heaven.

In our present-day confrontation with change and transition we may overlook the fact that our problems are no less traumatic than those encountered by the first Christians. They, too, had to face the question of fellowship during a period when people of varying backgrounds were accepting the message.

The Gospels tell of a transition which began with John the Baptist and the announcement of the arrival of the Kingdom of Christ. Resistance to the change came from those whose prejudice prevented them from seeing Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy. In Acts and the epistles, we read of the transition from Jewish, law-embracing Christianity to a grace-centered theology that opened the Kingdom to all men, both Jew and Gentile. For Jewish Christians, who gloried in their special relationship with God, sharing their inheritance in the Kingdom with uncircumcised Gentiles, as Peter and Paul taught, was a very bitter concept. Those books also reveal some of the conflicts that arose as pagan converts made the transition from idolatrous worship practices to those which were acceptable to God and to their more knowledgeable Jewish brothers in Christ. Surely our current confrontation with change is no more uncomfortable than what those first Christians faced.

As we study these books, we should be looking for the key to unity and fellowship. What was it that the Holy Spirit proclaimed through the apostles that eliminated the distinctions: male-female, bond-free, Jew-Gentile, and Greek-barbarian? What distinctions does that message eliminate today? Simple as these questions may seem, a lot of great minds (leaders of the Reformation and Restoration movements, for example) have reached widely differing conclusions in their attempts to find answers, so we should not proceed without first humbly seeking divine guidance.

But if we become free from the confinement of our traditional interpretation, we can inhale the fresh air of Scripture and ask ourselves, “What is that I smell?” Surely it will be the fragrant odor of Christ, and nothing else. If, in addition, we find rules, then let us apply them with the same emphasis they are given in their contexts. And if we find grace, let us be honest enough to acknowledge that citizenship in the Kingdom was clearly granted *then* to some whom today we might not include in our fellowship.

Change does make many of us uncomfortable. But if it leads us to a clearer understanding of the qualifications for citizenship in God's Kingdom, then perhaps we will come to realize that his family (and ours) is much larger than we thought.

What Is the Gospel?

by C. Leonard Allen
June, 1993

In 1932 an Oklahoma preacher named K. C. Moser (1893-1976) published a small book titled *The Way of Salvation*. The book addressed central New Testament themes: the nature of human sin, the righteousness of God, Christ's atoning death, justification by faith, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It did not make a big splash, even though G. C. Brewer, reviewing it in the *Gospel Advocate*, called it "one of the best little books that came from any press in 1932."

The book began with a methodical exposition of sin and the need for redemption. But it soon became clear that something was troubling Moser. Throughout the book ran a subtle but steady polemic: somebody was misconstruing the saving work of Christ and seriously compromising the gospel.

In the next few years Moser became more pointed and specific. A 1934 article titled "Can the Gospel Be Obeyed?" critiqued and rejected the traditional formulation of the gospel among Churches of Christ ("facts to be believed, commands to be obeyed, and promises to be received"). Then in a 1937 tract called "Are We Preaching the Gospel?" Moser stated flatly that much of the preaching among Churches of Christ could not properly be called gospel preaching.

True gospel preaching, Moser charged, had been eclipsed by what he termed the "plan theory." In this approach Christ's death became simply a somewhat arbitrary means to an end – the end being the giving of a divine plan of salvation. Christ's obedience unto death gave him the authority to set forth a "plan" consisting of four basic stipulations: faith, repentance, confession, and baptism.

Preaching thus focused on the "plan" – on what people must do – not on Christ and his role as sin-bearer. The "plan," in fact, was not intimately connected to Christ's death at all; rather, by his death Christ simply gained the authority to institute the plan. In the preaching of this plan, Moser observed, the cross usually "receives little or no emphasis" for it was simply one step in the giving of the "plan."

The burden of most of Moser's writing in the years that followed was to set forth the gospel over against the dominant "plan theory." Time and again he stressed that "Christ brought, not another code, but his precious blood. And by it sinners are redeemed. Our iniquities were laid upon him, and 'with his stripes we were healed.'" "Christ crucified for sinners," Moser insisted, "is the divine 'plan' of salvation."

Moser was not alone in his pointed concerns. Another outspoken preacher who shared many of Moser's concerns was G. C. Brewer (1883-1956). Though Brewer was a controversialist by nature and Moser was not, the two men were good friends. On preaching trips they sometimes stayed in each other's homes and over the years maintained a high regard for one another.

In his review of Moser's book, Brewer wrote that many Christians have made the gospel "a system of divine laws for human beings to obey and thus save themselves sans grace, sans mercy, sans everything spiritual and divine – except that the 'plan' was in mercy given."

In the years that followed, Brewer, like Moser, continued to criticize this "plan" theory. "To trust a plan is to expect to save yourself by your own works," he wrote in 1945. "It is to build according to a blueprint; and if you meet the specifications your building will be approved by the great Inspector! Otherwise you fail to measure up and you are lost!"

"That is all wrong, brethren!" Brewer exclaimed. "We have a Savior who saves us. We throw ourselves upon his mercy, put our case in his hands, and submit gladly and humbly to his will. That is our hope and our only hope."

Moser and Brewer fully agreed on a basic point: "The whole story of human redemption is comprehended in two words: 'grace' and 'faith.' It is "not a matter of law." Brewer wrote, "By making our salvation dependent upon our own perfection, we make void the grace of God. And to make our perfection a matter of legal requirements fully met would make Christ's death useless." He added that "We should be careful not to affirm the abrogation of one law and then substitute another law and make salvation dependent upon the same principle."

Moser's fullest and most explicit critique of the "plan theory" came in a 1952 pamphlet, *Christ Versus a Plan*. Here he gave four fundamental reasons for rejecting such an approach.

1) It removes Christ and the cross from first place and puts central emphasis on the "plan." "Times almost without number," Moser reported, "I have heard sermons on the conditions of salvation without a single reference to the cross. I have heard preaching in meetings that lasted for three weeks in which the cross of Christ received only a passing reference. But in every sermon a 'plan' was preached and sinners urged to do their 'duty.' The 'plan' was considered the gospel unto salvation."

Moser found it deeply disturbing that many preachers could spend so little time on the meaning of Jesus' death and yet so much on obeying the "plan." How could they virtually omit "the very thing that makes Jesus the Savior and preach the conditions apart from him"?

Moser's most fundamental complaint was that people were giving emphasis to a "plan of salvation" that belongs to Christ himself. They were "magnifying the conditions of salvation apart from Christ crucified." Christ did not direct people to a "plan," Moser insisted, but to himself – the full and final sacrifice for sin. None of the apostles preached a "plan." But rather Christ crucified. "Peter's subject on Pentecost was not repentance or baptism," he said, "but Christ. And it was after preaching Christ as the Messiah that he commanded anyone to do anything."

2) The "plan theory" views the conditions of salvation as arbitrarily given by God. People who preached the "plan," according to Moser, tended to say that God could have used some other plan, some other conditions of salvation, but he chose faith, repentance, confession, and baptism. One must not expect to know why, one must simply obey.

When a doctor diagnoses an illness and prescribes a remedy, Moser asked, does the patient not know why he must take the medicine? So with the so-called “conditions of salvation.” Sin is the illness and it requires repentance or turning away from sin. Jesus’ blood supplies the remedy and it calls for faith or trust in him. “It is as naturally required of sinners to have faith in Jesus as it is required of the hungry person to eat food.” And baptism, because it embodies or expresses repentance and trust, is a natural response to the blood of Christ.

3) The “plan theory” makes the “plan” the means of salvation, not Christ crucified. “If we are saved by a ‘plan,’” Moser asked, “does this not make the ‘plan’ our savior? Is there life in a ‘plan’? Is a ‘plan’ redemptive? Jesus thought that he died to save sinners. If he died to give us a ‘plan’ by which to be saved, then it is not his death by which we are saved, but the ‘plan’ given by reason of his death.”

For Moser the crux of the matter was this: “When the saving power is separated from the personal Christ and located in something accomplished by Jesus after his death, he no longer is the Savior. He is only the giver of that which saves.”

4) The “plan theory” misconceives the meaning of saving faith and obedience to Christ. If faith as trust in Christ is distorted, Moser said, so is obedience to him: “When the conditions of salvation are regarded as a ‘plan,’ the obedience required of the sinner is considered merely the response to the authority of Christ.” But obedience to Christ does not simply spring from the fact that Christ is now king and has the right to command. Rather, obedience flows directly out of one’s trust in Christ as the sin-offering. Indeed, such trust, Moser insisted, is obedience.

He made it clear that one certainly should not preach Christ “apart from the conditions of salvation.” But he added, “I do with all my heart condemn preaching the conditions of salvation apart from the cross. I have heard it done a thousand times!” In doing this one failed to preach Christ as Savior – and there could be “no error greater” in preaching than this.

Moser concluded his pamphlet with these words: “What this sinful world needs is not ‘plans’ and ‘schemes’ but Christ. When Christ crucified is not preached one should not preach at all.... Let us preach Christ or nothing.”

Over the years Moser’s writing and teaching brought sharp – and sometimes devastating – opposition. According to one of his daughters, the many attacks he received in the 1930s severely affected his health. Beginning about 1932 he began suffering from what was later diagnosed as ulcerative colitis. By 1935 it had grown so severe that his wife felt he was going to die.

His daughter later wrote of these years: “Though I was painfully aware that he was a sick man most of my growing-up years, I didn’t really know why until I was grown and understood the deep, personal wounds that my father had received.”

About 1935 Moser sought help at the famous Mayo Clinic, but was told that only a major change in his life would help. He changed. He quit full-time preaching and began spending most of his

time on his farm near Lubbock, Texas. And it so happened that his good friend G. C. Brewer was preaching in Lubbock during those years, and that friendship buoyed his spirits.

By 1940 Moser had recovered sufficiently to return to full-time preaching and served effectively for a number of years. In semi-retirement through the 1950s and '60s, he preached by appointment, taught Bible at Lubbock Christian College, and continued his writing.

In 1955 he wrote and published a hymn titled "Glory, Lord, to Thee." It well captures the central theme of all his writing and preaching.

Lord, before Thy cross I bow,
Human merit disavow;
Trustingly I look to Thee for cleansing pow'r.
Glory, glory, Lord, to Thee,
For redemption full and free;
Glory, honor be to Thee for evermore.

As the years passed the insistent call to focus on Christ rather than a "plan" gradually found a more receptive audience. As Moser, Brewer, and a few others pressed the matter, a growing number of church members began rethinking the traditional formulation of the gospel. Their efforts stand directly behind some of the theological shifts occurring among Churches of Christ today.

This article is adapted from Leonard Allen's recent book, *Distant Voices: Discovering a Forgotten Past for a Changing Church* (Abilene Christian University Press, 1993).

For further reading:

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For a more detailed account of K. C. Moser's life and personality, see Billie Silvey's article in the November, 1992 issue of *21st Century Christian* magazine.

Hope Network Newsletter: Change Without Chaos – Part 2

by Lynn Anderson
June, 1993

NOTE: The first part of this article appeared in Wineskins, Vol. II, No. 1, and described “Some Basic Assumptions for Change Agents.” The first five are:

- 1) *Change will not come until a group sees the need to change.*
- 2) *Change will not come without resistance.*
- 3) *Change won't come without trust.*
- 4) *Change won't come without ownership in the change process.*
- 5) *Change won't come without disequilibrium.*

This installment continues with the following observations:

6) Change generates less resistance and disequilibrium if options are maintained.

I know a number of urban churches which abruptly cancelled their Sunday night services – boom – and substituted small groups in homes. Seemed perfectly logical. Sunday night services fit rural, nineteenth-century culture, but their purpose seemed unclear in the late twentieth-century urban setting.

True, But, some church people will feel guilty if they don't come to the church building on Sunday nights and may view the cancellation as a step away from God. Some congregations employed a more effective strategy. When they switched to Sunday evening small groups in homes, they also maintained a “non-group” small group at the church building. Options!

Another example: Years back at the Highland church, we began singing occasionally during the communion reflection. Some loved it. Others smelled heresy! So we devised options. One Sunday we would say, “In this church Christians love to help each other worship. Some of us prefer silent reflection during the communion. So today the rest of us are going to love those people and reflect silently with them. But next Sunday, we will sing during communion, and those who prefer silence will love those who like singing. Options!

Unfortunately, sometimes the folks that have been around a congregation the longest have the most control and tend to force their way on what is often the larger group of more recent members. But, love does not force one group of people to move to another group's comfort zones. Maintaining options along with changes diminishes friction.

7) Change won't come immediately!

Back in the early days of our 19 years at Highland, some of the elders and I prayed and worked towards changes that didn't happen till 15 years later! Be patient.

Besides, pushing for immediate changes can backfire. Suppose that, on a scale of 10, I want to change a church from a 2 to a 9. Being a Type A person, I may consider myself a patient change agent if I only shoot for an 8 the first time. However, trying to go that far in one fell swoop may

actually drive the congregation backwards to a hardened minus 14! A more effective strategy might be to shoot for a 5 on the first attempt. And then celebrate progress if the group only makes it to a 3 on that round.

Some of my “aged peers” and I have tried to be change agents for over 30 years. Significant progress has been made, but not yet all we’d hoped for. Some younger than us are God’s change agents, too. Still others will come after we are gone. God did not appoint any one generation to single-handedly do the changes for all of history. No rush. Let God choose the timing. Celebrate the progress instead of lamenting the frustration. Besides, if you ever get things the way you want them, some “Young Turks” will come along and change it all anyway.

Perhaps the Serenity Prayer belongs here as well as in 12-step groups: “Lord, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

8) Change won’t come permanently without maintenance!

People forget. New Year’s resolutions seldom make it till March. We must regularly re-explain why changes are made. People need to be reminded of the reasons the new way is better. The biblical rationale for change must be repeated at regular intervals. We forget.

Good maintenance clearly spells out the parameters of change and frequently reviews them: “We will do this, but not do that. We will go this far and no farther. We will experiment this long, then reevaluate.” This reduces fear of change.

Maintenance is also needed because of turnover. Once a few years back, a trio of girls sang a communion reflection on Sunday morning, which we had often done previously but not for some months. You would have thought the bad place had busted loose! A wave of new members had “joined” since we had last used this singing format. They had not heard our rationale. What was old hat to most of us shocked the newcomers. A bit of maintenance might have brought the new folks up to speed and spared us all the trauma.

I am painfully aware of my own personal need for maintenance. You too, right? I clean up my act, then before long, I drift. Thank God for his patience! If individuals need maintenance, surely groups do too.

9) Again, principle #9 overlaps #8: Change will not come completely!

That’s human nature. Although I’ve been a Christian since high school, I am still wondering if I’ll ever realize some changes in my life that I have been working on for years. I really do want to change, and I am changing, gradually, but never completely. If individuals never change completely, why expect it of groups? The church is, after all, only a collection of blemished individuals.

Most urban churches experience constant turnover. For some months now, new families have joined with our congregation nearly every Sunday. People leave as well. Consequently, change will never completely keep pace with turnovers.

Finally, change will not come completely as long as the culture keeps changing. If we stay in touch with the culture, new church formats and approaches will have only a very short shelf life.

10) Change may not be ethical in some situations.

Some of us may be forced to hard choices. You may be driven by passion to reach totally unchurched seekers. But these people are not likely to be reached through traditional church models. So you may have tried your best to get your congregation to re-tool so that it can connect with the unchurched. But others, maybe even the founders who have invested their life's blood in your congregation, may be driven by a different vision for your church. In that case, to force your changes may not be ethical.

Churches don't have to all be the same. Some churches can change a little. Some a lot. I expect to see a lot more changes in the future because we are learning better change skills and strategies. We are also sifting what really needs to change from the merely cosmetic changes. But some churches won't be able to change – not at all! Attempts to force 180-degree changes on such churches simply is not ethical. If you are a member of such a church, but you feel driven by a vision that doesn't fit, you may need to say, "Brothers, would you help me plant a new church over yonder? I must do this in order to follow God's calling." Whether the people in your home congregation choose to help you or not, you have no God-given choice but to keep on loving and respecting them.

Enthusiasm for new church plantings is on the rise. For example, each year larger percentages of students in my graduate courses want to be church planters. However, the only legitimate reason for planting new churches is a God-given vision that cannot be accomplished where you are now. This is no reflection on your home church. It may simply mean that your vision does not fit your church's life-cycle. The first generation of a new church is usually highly evangelistic and clearly focused. But, as a church gathers additional "constituencies," it may become less militant and single-minded, but better at nurturing or at sending. Rather than being critical of such churches, let's celebrate their strengths.

All this talk of change is not a criticism of our past. It simply means we feel a passion to (1) connect with unchurched people, (2) worship authentically in the heart-language of the culture, and (3) effectively change lives. Yet, we must move cautiously lest in our push to connect we surrender something precious.

Look at the stars. Taurus, Pegasus, Orion, and the others move each hour of the night rotating around the North Star, but the North Star never moves. For centuries sailors have steered safely to harbor, guided by that one fixed star. Everything is changing, but Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. As my friend David Lusk says, "Let changes come. They must come. But let the North Star remain fixed, and all is well!"

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2 Leith Anderson, *Dying for Change*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1990), 11.

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AfterGlow: The Boo-Boo House

*by Phillip Morrison
July, 1993*

Our three-year-old grandson delights in telling people, “My daddy works at the boo-boo house!” Translated into adultese, that means his father is a physician and the boo-boo house is the hospital. Apparently Sam and Don Dobbins’ niece (page 25) have normal vocabularies for three-year-olds, with boo-boo being a favorite word.

These children will grow up and learn to deal with their minor scrapes and bruises. The hurts which require Band-Aids now will hardly be noticed when more serious pain is experienced.

Sin is much like that. It hurts tender consciences, but becomes more easily tolerated as our consciences adjust to the evil forces which bombard them. Early on, the sin is so painful we can hardly stand it, and the tears of remorse flow freely. Later, we become so hardened that the pain is hardly felt and the tears are dammed up, then dried up. What was once roundly rejected is now readily accepted. Like Lot moving toward Sodom, we get so accustomed to the darkness of sin that we hardly notice we are moving away from the light.

Sin is much more than a boo-boo. No minor hurt to be covered by a Band-Aid, sin is always fatal unless cured by the Great Physician. A splinter in a finger? We can pull it out ourselves. A painful speck lodged in an eye? We can manage. But we can’t do our own brain surgery, or cure our own cancer, or remove our own sins.

The blood of Jesus, freely given by a loving God, is the only cure for sin. We are dead in our trespasses and sins, and only God can give us life.

When a friend was criticized for saying that we do not contribute anything to provide our salvation, I asked the critic, “And what have you contributed to provide for your salvation?” I’m still waiting for an answer. Yes, I have faith. Yes, I have been baptized. Yes, I go to church, read the Bible, pray, give, commune, teach, love, serve. Those are certainly appropriate responses to God’s love and grace, but they don’t buy me anything. What I most need cannot be earned; it has been given, and it can only be received.

The shame of our sin causes us, like Adam and Eve, to hide from God. But he won’t allow it. He still comes searching and searching, not willing that any should perish. Only total rebellion and rejection can overcome his determination to reclaim us for his own. His grace is greater than all our sins.

It is not surprising to find that the very last words in the story of God’s grace are these: “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen” (Revelation 22:21).