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What's So Dangerous About Grace?

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How can one talk about grace being dangerous? Is 'amazing grace' not at the heart of the Christian faith? Certainly, but the Christian faith is about more than just grace. Any one belief pushed to an extreme becomes dangerous. With Christian doctrine what counts is not just holding the right beliefs but holding them in the right balance. Half truths blown up into whole truths can become untruths. Jesus was God but he was also fully human, a man. Either truth proclaimed to the exclusion of the other becomes an error. Again, we need to hold together the sovereignty of God and human responsibility and choice. To take one of these only and to deny the other is to go astray.

But what about grace? Are there two sides to be borne in mind here? Indeed there are. There are two truths that need to be held in tension, as can be seen from some examples.

1. In the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14) the Pharisee thanked God for all his good works and that he was better than others. The tax collector by contrast beat his breast and said, 'God be merciful to me, a sinner.' It was the tax collector, not the Pharisee, who was accepted by God. Here we see the grace of God shown to the worst of sinners and are reminded that this is the only ground on which we can approach God. But that is only half of the story. A few chapters earlier in the same gospel (Luke 14:25-33), the same Jesus speaks uncompromisingly of the demands of discipleship and warns that 'any of you who does not give up everything that he has cannot be my disciple.' The promise of acceptance to the worst sinner does not rule out the demand for total commitment from all believers.

2. Paul teaches justification by faith alone, that we are accepted by God not on the ground of our good works or merits but solely on the basis of Christ's death for us on the cross. 'The foulest sinner who truly believes, That moment from Jesus a pardon receives.' Here again is the comforting message of grace. But the same Paul also teaches, as do other New Testament writers, that we are to be judged by our works. 'For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due to him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad' (II Cor. 5:10). He warns the Corinthian Christians that those indulging in a variety of activities, such as adultery, theft or drunkenness, will not inherit the kingdom of God (I Cor. 6:9f.). The message of free acceptance does not rule out the need for obedience.

3. A similar point was made by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who joined the resistance against Hitler and was hanged by the Nazis in the closing days of the war. In his *Cost of Discipleship*, he talks of the distinction between cheap and costly grace. Cheap grace breaks our tension by offering forgiveness without repentance, grace without discipleship. Cheap grace proclaims the forgiveness of sins without the resolve to forsake sin. Cheap grace interprets 'grace alone' to mean that we can remain as we are without changing. Costly grace, however, calls us to follow Christ. It is costly because it cost God

the life of his Son and because it costs us our life. 'The only man who has the right to say that he is justified by grace alone is the man who has left all to follow Christ. ...Those who try to use this grace as a dispensation from following Christ are simply deceiving themselves.'¹

4. It is important to maintain this tension in the overall thrust of a preaching ministry. One of my students once told me that at church he expects to hear the basic message: 'You're OK. God has accepted you in Christ'. That is certainly an important part of the Gospel and in a western world that is obsessed with the need for self-esteem it is the only message heard in many churches. But there is an equal need for another message: 'You're not OK. Your life falls short of what is expected of a Christian. Don't just relax and enjoy justification but repent and get on with sanctification.' Indeed, without this second message the first ceases to be the biblical doctrine of justification by faith and becomes instead a secular message of self-esteem. As Luther pointed out, if we take away the law we lose the Gospel as well.

5. The same tension also works itself out in the doctrine of the church. On the one hand, the church is the community of forgiveness. Moral achievement is not a precondition for entry. The church is the school for forgiven sinners, the hospital for those who are being healed from sin. When the church becomes a moralistic club for the respectable, it has lost touch with its role. Yet, at the same time, the church is meant to witness not just to human impotence but to renewal by God's grace. We are rightly scandalised by those episodes of church history where the church has exemplified the basest of moral behaviour. The church has to maintain the difficult balance of welcoming sinners without sanctioning and approving their continuation in sin.

In each of these examples we see a similar tension. There is the good news of free grace but there is also the call to discipleship — not as an optional extra for the zealous but as part of the basic package. As someone once put it, the entrance fee for the Christian faith is nothing, but the annual subscription is everything. When we are in Christ, we receive the free gift of justification but we also need to press on with the arduous task of sanctification.² At different

times one or other side of this tension has been lost. At times the church has lapsed into preaching cheap grace, as Bonhoeffer put it, and Christians have been shamefully indistinct from the ungodly. At other times the stress has been on the moral demands of Christian faith and the radical message of forgiveness has faded into the background.

The title of this paper deliberately alludes to Philip Yancey's popular book *What's so Amazing about Grace?* This is a very eloquent and moving account of grace. Yancey is a superb communicator and knows how to tell gripping stories that convey Christian truth. But at the same time he is perhaps a little too dismissive of other ways of approaching Christian truth. Referring disparagingly to an article which dissects the doctrine of grace, he comments, 'I would far rather convey grace than explain it'.³ This is similar to the famous comment by Thomas a Kempis that 'I would rather feel repentance in my heart than be able to define it' (*Imitation of Christ* 1:1). If that is the choice before us then Thomas, like Yancey, clearly chose the right option. But is it not better still both to feel repentance *and* to be able to define it? Then we will be able to ensure that what we feel really is repentance and we will be better equipped to lead others to true repentance.

Yancey lays his stress very heavily on one side of the tension that we have been describing. He stresses the truth of the unmerited forgiveness of God and our total dependence upon this. He reminds us again how lavish and totally undeserved is the grace of God. He also shows how Christians have often failed to grasp that message. He warns against the lack of forgiveness in so many relationships and the devastating consequences that follow. He rightly protests against petty legalism in Christian circles and against judgementalism. With the American scene in mind, he warns especially against Christians who have turned to politics and who have brought to this a hatred of their opponents. There are times when the church should fight moral issues, as Yancey acknowledges, but the danger of fighting too many moral campaigns is that non-Christians see in the church a harsh and ungracious judgementalism and a militant and unloving political activism. Like Jesus, Yancey teaches especially by telling stories. He focuses on the parables of the gos-

pels (making little mention of other biblical teaching) and tells (real-life) stories of his own to make the same points. He selects a range of biblical parables and stories that stress the freeness of grace: the three parables of Luke 15 – the lost coin, the lost sheep and especially the prodigal son; the banquet for the outcasts (Matt. 22, Luke 14); the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt 18); the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matt. 20). All of these point to the generosity and grace of God.

Yancey brings out very forcefully, powerfully and movingly one side of our tension. The other side of the tension is not totally absent, but it is subdued by comparison. In addition to the parables cited by Yancey, there are many other parables in the Gospels that bring out the other side of our tension. The parable of the wise and foolish builders (Matt. 7) is a warning to those who do not put Jesus' teaching into practice. The parable of the sheep and the goats is a frightening story of final judgement (Matt. 25). And so on.

Yancey's book is a superb account of grace that deserves the acclaim it has received, but it can easily be misunderstood.⁴ Too many people seize upon the one side of the tension and ignore the other. Perhaps this can be illustrated from one particular statement of Yancey's which is often quoted. '*Grace means that there is nothing we can do to make God love us more. ... And grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us less – no amount of racism or pride or pornography or adultery or even murder.*'⁵ There is an important sense in which this is true,⁶ but if this is all that is said it seriously undermines motivation and responsibility. It can be and is easily understood to be saying that there are no consequences.

For there is also an important sense in which Yancey's statement is not true. Jesus tells us that *if we obey his commandments* we will remain in his love and compares this to the way in which he remains in his Father's love (John 15:10). Psalm 103 repeatedly talks of God's love *for those who fear him* (Psalm 103:11, 13, 17f.). Of course there is a fundamental sense in which God still loves us when we stray from him – as is portrayed in the parable of the Prodigal Son. But there is also a crucial sense in which God's

love and favour *are* affected by our willful rebellion. To lead Christians to suppose that they can remain in sin and rebellion with impunity because God will love them no less is cruelly to deceive them.

The same tendency can be seen in the April-May 2001 issue of *NB*, the UCCF supporters' magazine. There, in the context of a study of Colossians, we read that 'Grace has no **IFs**, only **therefore**; no conditions, only consequences'. That there are no 'ifs' is not strictly true even of Colossians: '*.. to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation – if you continue in your faith*' (1:22f.). It is far from true if we consider the New Testament as a whole – e.g. Matt. 6:14f., John 13:17, 15:5f., 14, Rom. 8:13. If we look beyond the use of the word 'if', it is abundantly clear that the New Testament is full of conditions. 'If you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins' (Matt. 6:15). Now it is true that there is an important sense in which the grace of God is unconditional. But to move from this to saying that there are *no ifs* and *no conditions* is to turn a half-truth into an error.

Yancey's message is addressed especially (but not exclusively) to American fundamentalism, with its judgementalism and long lists of petty rules. Given such a context, his emphasis is entirely understandable and appropriate. Furthermore, the faults he is addressing are found in varying degrees in all churches and are by no means totally absent in the U.K. today – but is this the greater danger facing British evangelicals? Which side of our tension is the British church in greater danger of losing today? Many would say that it is the message of free grace that needs to be stressed, but it can be argued that the very concern to stress that side is itself evidence of an accommodation to culture. We live in a culture that lays increasing stress on our rights and is correspondingly silent about our duties. We live in a society in which children can commit all sorts of offences at school with minimal consequences but a teacher who intervenes physically in an attempt to restrain a child is in danger of being prosecuted for assault. We live with a Welfare State that has encouraged us to regard all sorts of provisions as our inalienable right. Some will doubtless wish to challenge this analysis, pointing instead to re-

cent attempts to begin to redress the balance — first by Thatcherite Conservatives then by neo-Thatcherite New Labour.⁷ But the very fact that, for example, attempts to impose conditions on those receiving unemployment benefit are interpreted as repressive is telling evidence of the extent to which the emphasis on ‘rights’ has taken over from an emphasis on duties.

When it comes to Christian truth, what is it that really offends today? Is it the message that God forgives? If that offends, it is liable to do so only because of the prior assumption that there is something to forgive. How dare God interfere with my basic human right to make my own choices? Or else God’s forgiveness is taken for granted. As the poet Heinrich Heine put it on his deathbed (1856), ‘*Dieu me pardonnera; c’est son métier.*’ - ‘God will forgive me; it’s his trade.’

No, if there is anything that really offends today it is not that God freely forgives, but rather that he makes demands. It is not the free handout of the gospel that offends a culture accustomed to free education and healthcare. What is offensive is the call to discipleship and the demand for commitment. Where past generations were accustomed to lords who ruled over them, we are used to politicians who are vilified in the media and who are so terrified that the electorate will terminate their employment that they use every method of market research available in their endeavour to keep the customers satisfied.

Whichever side of the tension is under greater threat today, the fact remains that the message of free grace needs to be held in tension with the call to discipleship. You cannot be a Christian without following Jesus. If the grace of God is proclaimed in such a way as to deny or mute that challenge, then it has indeed become a most dangerous doctrine.

REFERENCES

¹ D. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, London, SCM, (1959), 35-47.

² Justification and sanctification are held together in that we receive both in Christ. They are, as Calvin put it, like the heat and light of the sun: distinct but inseparable (*Institutes* 3:11:6). That does not in itself prevent us from falling into the trap of stressing one to the exclusion of the other.

³ P. Yancey, *What’s so Amazing about Grace?* Grand Rapids, Zondervan, (1997), 16.

⁴ Martyn Lloyd Jones argued, on the basis of Romans 6:1, that if a preacher is never misunderstood to be teaching antinomianism he is probably not preaching justification by faith alone (*Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 6* (London, Banner of Truth, 1972, 8-10). Insofar as that is true, the preacher who is never misunderstood to be teaching legalism is probably not preaching the radical demands of discipleship.

⁵ Yancey, *What’s so Amazing about Grace?*, 70 (his emphasis).

⁶ For a helpful account of the senses in which God’s love is and is not unconditional, cf. D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, Leicester, IVP, (2000) 26.

⁷ This description is intended as a compliment!

For Further Reading

Tony Lane has developed these themes in a book to be entitled *Justification by Faith in Recent Catholic-Protestant Dialogue: An Evangelical Assessment*, which will be appearing next year.

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