

# Life by Grace in Christian Thought and Practice



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By

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# CONTENTS

Grace: The Fundamental .....	1
Unpacking the fundamental: grace	
What is grace?	
The cost of grace	
Result of the fundamental: harmony	
A World of “Ungrace” .....	18
Grace in society	
Grace in Salvation .....	31
The need of salvation	
By grace alone	
Recognising grace in baptism	
Universalism?	
Common grace	
Incomplete salvation	
Response to grace	
What is life?	
Transforming grace	
The role of the Spirit	
Daily grace	
Ongoing grace	
The Nature of God .....	81
God is love	
God is holy	
God is Trinity	
Generation	
Subordination	
Illustrating the Trinity	
Reflecting the Trinity	
Imaging the economic Trinity	

The Christian Life.....	100
Manifesting grace	
Grace in the image	
The image in society	
The image in the individual	
Christ as the model	
A life of holiness	
Grace in marriage	
Fruit of the Spirit	
Grace and law	
Resisting evil	
Ministering grace	
Gifts of grace (the <i>charismata</i> )	
The practice of charity	
Tithing	
Mission as grace	
Grace for Life.....	163
References .....	165

## GRACE: THE FUNDAMENTAL

Over the last few years, my research and writing interests have been focussed on the Trinity. This has obviously been a challenge, partly because the danger of slipping into error has been quite high, but also because there has not been very much work done on the subject in recent years. Hopefully I have avoided the first, which is a real hope as what I have come to believe is not entirely conventional. Naturally work in one area develops into the next, and this led me to think about grace. Hopefully also however, I have increased our understanding of God; most importantly, I feel I know more, and have been blessed by it. Here my new subject is also a challenge, but perhaps for the opposite reason; the subject has, quite naturally, spawned a lot of writing. The challenge is then to say anything that is novel, so worth saying, but in fact I believe that the connection between grace and the Trinity has not been realised before, and so is an idea worth developing. My hope then is that what I am doing is worthwhile. The doctrine of the Trinity is enjoying increasing interest, and, I believe, justifiably so, as it is foundational to the faith and its understanding. I hope that the connection with grace will enhance the process. Above all, may it be a blessing to others, as it has been to me, to dwell on it. Can it fail to do so? Hardly when the concern is of what our God is like, and of course this immediately suggests the link with grace, for that is what God has done, which I believe is a natural result of who he is, acting in a way that reflects his nature as Trinity.

Hopefully, then, this little book will contribute to what is a growing interest in the Trinity, reversing a neglect of several centuries. At the same time, it should help to reverse another current trend, which is, as James Packer says, that holiness is a neglected concern in the modern Church, and specifically in its evangelical wing, where he feels the traditional approach has become sterile (Peterson 1995:11). I feel that a centring on grace would reverse the sad trend of a decline in the quality of Christian life.

Very many years ago I sat a series of exams, first at school, then at university and then in various types of theological education. I was so very

glad when I finally got to the end; I became full of admiration for those who went in for study in more mature years. Not that I have ever stopped studying, but what I have given up is examinations. However, particularly at school and at Cambridge, I had to go through a long series of exams, and then, when I was called to be a missionary and went into serious theological study, I embarked on a few more. I do remember so well that the BD exam comprised eight papers, the first six of which were in the mornings and afternoons of Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of one week, with the next on that Thursday morning. Then, mercifully, although I doubt if it was deliberate, I had a break of a few days before the last. I did have a lot of trouble really applying myself for that last, and taking it seriously; I had had enough. Since then I have only done a couple, such as a language exam in Zulu, which I also found hard to apply myself to. I was interested in reading and speaking Zulu, but not in any exam!

That long exposure to exams hopefully taught me a lot of what I needed to know, and has been a blessing, even if I know that I have forgotten the majority of what I learnt. What it also did, although that was not the intention, was to educate me not just in the material that I was studying, but how to succeed in exams. I learnt, for example, the value of looking at old papers; when I did my engineering, I spent hours in the university library where they had a lot of old papers, and also model answers to them. I found at the actual exams that some of the questions had actually occurred before! Most importantly, I learnt the importance of being able to summarise, and to encapsulate the essence of a large subject in a way that is easily memorisable, in a short paragraph, even in a sentence or a word, that gives the key to the rest of the material.

Can this be done for Christianity? Of course much of the practice of Christianity is actually the opposite, with the multiplication into sermons and a plethora of books. Most ministers seem to love growing their personal libraries; I hope that they open the books! I find it quite upsetting to visit libraries and discover that some books have not been touched for years. We do seem also to be addicted to conferences, and other word-multiplying events. So is it possible to suggest a key distillation of what Christianity is all about? This is such that all the rest is commentary on just that fundamental. I believe that there is, and this is a single word, GRACE. Everything revolves about and expands that fundamental concept.

Unlike me, my wife comes from a family that has had a long-standing Christian commitment for several generations. It is in keeping with this



that she has an appropriate middle name, “Grace”. We have continued the tradition with some of our children, although with one of them it is not so immediately recognisable, as we used the Zulu version, “Musa”. That also reflects our history as we came to southern Africa as missionaries, serving originally in areas where Zulu was the main language. Hopefully, every time we meet our children we are reminded of that great Christian word and of what it means, and whenever they have to give their full names it is also broadcast. Then our first grandchild is called Hannah, which is from the Hebrew equivalent.

Grace is a fundamental Christian quality. So just as it identifies my wife and our children, it identifies the Gospel, and therefore the Biblical writings. C S Lewis was once asked what was totally distinctive about Christianity, for almost all of it, even accounts of resurrection, have parallels in other faiths; his answer was “grace” (Yancey 1997:45). Jeremiah (2006:34) comments that there are only two religions in the world, those of human achievement and of divine accomplishment. In fact grace must be recognised as fundamental to us; from any perspective, the Bible is right in that we are dust (Gen 2:7), so we are naturally weak and mortal. If we do not receive the help of God in grace, our lives are inevitably weak and short. This realisation receives great emphasis when we are confronted with the total contrast of who God is.

Surely the impression that most have about God is that he demands righteousness and justice, but at the same time that this is simply impossible. In this case it is hardly surprising that the Faith is declining and churches are emptying, especially when their manifestation of Christianity is fundamentally what is said in other religions. But, and this is a very big “but”, the Christian faith, although it proclaims righteousness and justice, really centres rather on grace, the offer of totally free salvation. Surely if this was realised, there would be a flood into the Faith as there was in the early church, and has been at some precious times of revival thereafter? Or does it seem too good to be true? Have we lost something absolutely fundamental?

So what does grace do, and what is its result? The answer to the first is that it is a means by which relation occurs. By the giving of grace between the Persons of the Trinity, they relate together. Then by God’s giving of grace, we relate to him. Then of course, in the giving of grace between members of God’s family, the Church, they inter-relate. But I also want to suggest that this inter-relating is the essence of what life is. The essential

quality that a living thing has is the dynamic interaction of the parts of what is alive, which at its ideal, is by grace.

The format of letters in New Testament days naturally differed from the custom that pertains today. Very sensibly, it starts by identifying the author and the recipient, and then, before the actual letter starts, it provides a greeting, which often invokes a blessing (Yancey 1997:66), the promise of grace. Buechner comments that grace is the best that the writer can wish them, because grace is the best thing that he himself ever received. In the case of the New Testament epistles to the various churches, the greeting generally follows a consistent pattern:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Unpacking the fundamental: grace**

I want to suggest that the word “grace” forms a most appropriate greeting for the fundamental Christian writings, as the concept encapsulates the very nature of God and the Gospel message, the distinctive ideas of the Gospel. Then I want to add that it also contains the heart of what should be the Christian ethic and lifestyle. It is this, grace, and the peace coming from it, which should summarise the ways in which the Gospel message plays out in day to day living, which make the Christian lifestyle distinctive, and is then a witness to a world which is governed by other motives. More than this, grace is absolutely foundational to the Christian message, as it reflects the very nature of God, specifically in the distinctive Christian understanding of Trinity, and so underlies the very nature of what he does. In a nutshell, what I am trying to do is to relate the key issue of salvation, and its outworking in interpersonal relations, to the underlying principle underlying them, rather than to statements about them.

Of course, having stated the priority of grace, I must immediately start to unpack it, which results in three facets, each of which is totally distinctive from beliefs in other religions and systems. It is grace which is that basic principle; it is grace which is the foundation of our faith. Emphatically, grace is not just an act of God, which we tend to think that it is, but is fundamental to the very nature of God and his life and action, so should then be for us. “Grace is not simply what God does, it is what God is ... Without grace, God would not be known, and without God, grace would have no meaning” (Edwards 2003:4). White (1979:197) explains that God’s love for the world, the inter-Personal love in the Trinity, and the love of the disciples for God, give one reciprocal relationship upon which

life and salvation ultimately depend. Tragically, however, as Pawson (1996:104) remarks, one of the loveliest words has become the focus of controversies between Christians and churches. Is that actually an indication of its lack?

If there is then a key Biblical text which summarises this little book, it is to be found in the book of Titus:

*The grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all, training us ... to live upright and godly lives in the world (Tit 2:11).*

Grace! The fundamental of life from the very being of God, to give his life to us by grace in salvation, to enable us to reflect that life in grace to others.

The first basic concept is that a person can be saved, and receive eternal life. Here the distinctive feature is that the means of this is that it is an act of grace; salvation being offered to people as an absolutely free gift, just having to be received. A neat explanation is that salvation is **God's Riches At Christ's Expense**. It cannot be emphasised enough that the heart of the Gospel, the good news, is that salvation is an absolute gift. There are no acts that have to be done, no payment or sacrifice that we have to make; it is totally free. All that we have to do is to receive it. That is of course free to us; the Christian message is that this is only possible through what Jesus came to do; and the cost to him was immeasurable.

It must be pointed out here that the whole act of salvation involved several gifts of grace. God gave to Christ what was needed to pay for sin, and Christ gave to God the ransom price. Then Christ gives to us eternal life, we give obedience and love. More can, and will, be said here!

This can perhaps be said to be the heart of the Christian message. Schleiermacher said that Christianity was summarised in absolute dependence (Barrett 2021:72), which is grace. Grace is the essence of how we can, and do, relate to God.

But all things have causes and consequences, and grace is no exception. These highlight the second and third fundamental and distinctive features of the Gospel.

The second basic concept is the consequence of the fact that we are saved by the free grace that God gives to us. This is that just as God has shown grace to us, we should act in similar grace to those with whom we have to

do. Rudnick (1979:63) explains that our natural gratitude (the natural response to grace, as the word suggests) is channelled not so much to God, but to others. One of the burdens of this little book is that we should not be content simply to receive grace, but should then give it to God and others. Only in this way do we really image what God is like, which means the Trinity. McQuilkin (1987:151) says that what should be the natural Christian life is of loving responses to difficulty, those of joy, peace, humility and so on, but immediately contrasts this with the experience of the “normal” Christian, who acts just like a morally upright non-Christian. This should not be; Jesus did not do just what was right, but beyond it in grace! The essence of the Christian way is not only living fairly and justly; these are important, but the key concept and practice is the giving of grace to others. God saves not just those who act justly and fairly, so could be felt to be worthy, but the unworthy; in reflecting this, we then give to those who do not deserve it. It must however immediately be added that God then changes people to be better and so more deserving; that should be our goal with others as well.

Lohse (1991:166) points out that love for each other is the mark of discipleship of Jesus, but importantly, this is not just a command to the disciples. Rather it is the result of the love that binds the disciples to their Lord; faith and love are “an indissoluble unity” (Lohse 1991:168). This will mean that faith should inevitably lead to works, as James insisted. Luther stressed that ethics must be based on our salvation, on justification (Grenz 1997:157). At the same time, as Jesus said (Jn 15:1f), we can do nothing unless we abide in the vine, in him. Whoever loves Jesus will then love his commandments. Horton (1987:126) thus says that our sanctification is evidenced in obedience (rather, incidentally, than in gifts, notably *glossolalia*).

Lohse (1991:185) explains that sin was dealt with by the suffering, so the death of Jesus. This death means that sin also comes to an end for those who belong to Jesus. This demands that as the suffering of Christ was the result of, and enabled by, grace, and the end of our sin is by grace, so our life in Christ should be an ongoing manifestation of grace.

The fundamental Christian lifestyle is then of grace, of what can be given, and not, which is the common human view, of what can be received. The prevalent preoccupation with self, the “new narcissism” (Rudnick 1979:62), must be rejected, however without excessive self-denigration; we are in God’s image! At the same time, just as grace in the Trinity is, as we shall see, to the other Persons, our giving grace is in and to the

Christian community, those in the image of God. Pearls are not to be cast before swine (Matt 7:6). Our focus is not on people as such, which is humanism, but on the image of God, so those in the faith (Jones 1984:140).

As salvation, this is only possible from the re-creative act of God. Lohse (1991:40) points out that the kingdom of God is not the result of a development, but from God's intervention; he points to the parables of the harvest, which can only come after God acted by sowing the seed (eg Mk 4:1-34), then gave growth to the seed. The kingdom of God is then not a result of political action. It is a bringing of grace to those in society who are lost, with whom Jesus was ready to associate with in grace (Lohse 1991:41).

Jones (1994:12) says that the classic text for the Christian life is to be a "living sacrifice". He notes that Paul appeals to his own example of self-subordination for the sake of others (Jones 1994:23). Hegre (1960:72) draws attention to the words of Jesus: "if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself" (Matt 16:24), and stresses that it is an action that we must make (1960:73). The influential Kant said that all our actions arise out of general principles (Grenz 1997:31); my belief is that this should be grace. In this case, as indeed Kant said, our ethical motive should focus on our treatment of others. The stress on behaviour falls not on oneself but on the neighbour (Verhey 1984:69). Many remark on the fact that, for example in Mark, there is little direct parnetic material; life is not just in obedience to teaching, but as Verhey (1984:78) says, citing Anderson, that the Christian life is "liberated to be responsive in grace". The basic religious principle of humility before God is worked out in the New Testament in humility before others, then to social subordination (White 1979:131); indeed submission to authority becomes a major theme in 1 Peter (White 1979:188). I would suggest that despite the assertion in an older book (White 1979:7), this gives a distinctive Christian ethic. Jones (1994:100) says that it is the mark of a true servant of God, citing particularly the case of Moses (Num 12:3). However, it is not self-loathing; we are after all in the image of God. In fact this realisation must produce at the same time both a humility when compared with God, and a great sense of worth and value.

Indeed, the practice of grace does not just give benefit to the one who receives it, but also to the one who gives. Smith (2014:205) points out that work for others is a means of grace, giving a blessing to the one who works.

Effectively, Christian ethics is not following any code or pattern, but from the relationship to Jesus; it follows directly from new life in Christ; it is “reflecting on, and living out the practical aspects of existence in Christ” (Daly, in Grenz 1997:97). Everything that is done and suffered must conform to what is believed, loved and hoped for (Moltmann 2012:xiii). Verhey (1984:128) points out that the characteristic word in the Pastorals for the Christian way of life is *eusebeia* “godliness”. We see the glory of God fully reflected in the human nature of the Christ who says “Follow me” (Jones 1994:25). There is no autonomous morality in the Bible; it is based squarely on the person’s faith (Verhey 1984:72). It is surely far from right to believe, with Moltmann (2012:xii), that Christians have no better answers to life’s questions than secular people or those of other faiths.

Incidentally, White (1979:189) notes Selwyn’s view that obedience was a characteristic of Jewish ethical thought, especially in Deuteronomy; God opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble (Deut 5:5,6). In this Christianity is faithful to its Jewish roots. This is an absolute contrast with that of the world; it should make the Christian lifestyle totally distinctive, radically different. There must be a world-renouncing, as White (1979:201) sees particularly in John. In contrast to the world, our focus as Christians lies on what we can give, and not on what we can receive. In his foreword, Hodges (1989:ix) identifies a disturbing trend in modern Christianity of an increasing profession of Christ with a decreasing demonstration of Christian moral and ethical values.

Also incidentally, the humility that is at the heart of the Christian ethic is not simply a desire for self-negation, as some, such as Duns Scotus, have said (Jones 1994:33). That would actually be Buddhism. Rather it is the way to significance, but understood as relying on God. After all, God regards us as important and significant enough for Jesus to suffer and die for us. It is, of course, also not from a morbid desire to suffer for its own sake. The well-known Westminster Catechism says that the chief end of man is to enjoy God, as well as to worship.

Kendall (2014:165) relates that Gandhi was enormously impressed by Jesus, and considered becoming a Christian. He was however put off by the conduct of Christians, who did not reflect the one they called Lord. The same is reportedly true of Muhammed, who met people who called themselves Christians, but who were heretical Arians. These are two people who have had a tremendous influence on a great proportion of humanity, but who were lost to the Gospel because of those who did not follow the example of Christ as they should have done. What a loss. What

a tragedy. And how many more were and are in the same situation! What an impetus to live in conscious imitation of Jesus. Strikingly, of course, the world continues in sin! This is because leading a good life also requires grace (cf Tit 2:11), so unless people actually receive it, they will just not manifest a life of grace.

The third basic concept naturally follows from this. This is that the grace of salvation and the grace that a Christian life should embody are based on the nature of God himself. He saves us by grace because grace is his nature; we should act in grace because that images the nature of God himself. The means of Christian salvation is an act of grace from his very nature, in that God sent his Son as a gift into the world, and he in his turn gave his life as a sacrifice for us. God then sent his Spirit as a gift to empower a life of grace in those who belong to him, a realisation even anticipated in the Old Testament (Ez 36:26). The Christian ethic is totally dependent on the re-created nature (White (1979:152). We receive grace from God in the gift of salvation; our response is that we present our lives and bodies to God in obedience (Rom 6:12-3). Even more fundamentally, I have suggested that the very inner being of God is of grace, that the three Persons of the Trinity each give totally in grace to the other two, that this dynamic interaction of grace, known as *perichōrēsis*, is the nature of the inner being of God. Grace is the fundamental of everything that is (Grounds 1975:22-3, also citing Rahner), underlying the whole of reality. In this case, the Trinitarian nature of God, and our being in God's image underlies the Christian ethic (Grenz 1997:238). As Foster (1981:15) puts it, the more clearly we understand the nature of God, the more clearly we understand how we are to live.

Grace is not a thing but God in action (Grounds 1975:24, Smedes 1983:119). This reflects the fact that it is doing rather than being which is the heart of Christianity, because that is the nature of God. Grace actively makes the Persons; this is also the case in justification, where grace makes us children of God, then makes us more holy. It is this that underpins the second basic idea, that the essence of the faith is harmony, the result of grace.

Emphatically, the Persons of the Trinity are different, but in this difference they are also equal because of their interaction. In a nutshell, the three Persons of the Trinity, because they eternally give in grace to each other, can then live in harmony. The expression of this in the incarnation results in harmony between a people saved by grace, and with their God. Thirdly, if all lived in grace with others, the result would be harmony between all.

Most important here is the observation that all of the actions of God's giving in grace reflect his sovereignty. They produce effects that just cannot happen in the normal course of events; grace is totally essential in all three cases. We cannot save ourselves; God has to do it. The equality of the Trinitarian Persons is impossible without the act of grace between them, and certainly the grace that we should show to others also could not be without the grace that comes from the divine life within a Christian. Kendall (2011:172) then says that living the life that Jesus commands is then totally uncommon.

In all three areas, there is a significant distinction that has to be made, for grace is a divine quality and does not then pertain fully in the world. Thus while grace operates fully in *perichōrēsis* in the immanent Trinity, God in himself, it is not the same in the economic, God in the world, where the expressions of the second and third Persons are limited in *kenōsis* (cf Phil 2:7). Then in the matter of salvation, while grace is given to those being saved in a relationship to God, it is not the means of eternal life outside of that relationship; thus, salvation is then not universal. Finally, whereas the ethic of grace should be the one practised in the Church, the body of Christ, it is seen as an impracticable ideal otherwise. Yancey (1997:248) cites G K Chesterton, who said that a cosiness between church and state is good for the state but bad for the church. The Christian message gets watered down, and can devolve into civil religion (Yancey 1997:250). Here it is often said that the early Christians could adopt an impracticable attitude because they felt that the world would not actually last much longer (White 1979:99). Rather however, it would indeed be impracticable, except that it is enabled by grace, the power of God.

Importantly again here, is the fact that this act of grace, the revelation to us from God does have to be accepted and believed.

The *perichōrēsis* in the Trinity is a relating, with each party both giving and receiving. This has a most important implication for our spiritual life, which is fundamentally a relationship with God, the manifestation of eternal life. God gives, but we must also receive. Then, in addition, we give, and God receives. He is affected by us! This means that he is affected by our suffering, he is not impassible. Then also he receives and is affected by our joy; he receives our worship, which of course would not have been possible without his giving to us his saving grace.

A further effect of this is then that every member of the Godhead is involved in every divine act. Anderson & Saucy (2001:13) apply this



particularly to sanctification; this is not limited to the work of the Spirit, hence there are Biblical references to the contribution of each Person.

It should perhaps just be added here that although I have said that the basic fundamental is the grace given to us in salvation through Christ, there is a preliminary act of grace, and without it, the other two aspects of belief would also disappear. That act is the revelation that Christ is in fact who the Bible says that he is. Although I feel that scientifically, the evidence demands the existence of God, accepting the divinity of Jesus is not of the same order, but depends upon the record of the events and the words contained in the Bible, especially the evidence of the resurrection. If this revelation were in fact not true, and Jesus were not divine, then there would be no salvation, there is no Trinity, and no indication of how we are to live.

As with all the acts of grace, belief is not simply forced upon us, but our free will is respected. Nevertheless it must also be pointed out here that while science and our intellect give us one leg of evidence for our faith, and then revelation, centred on Christ, a second leg, there is also a third, resting on Christian experience. There is thus a threefold witness to the nature of God, delightfully Trinitarian, but that will have to wait until the next book!

## **What is grace?**

I am sure that I will never forget the feeling of joy that I had when I realised that Jesus had died, not just as an event in the past, but as something that was for me. It was the passage in Isaiah 53 that God used to speak to me; I remember that I was especially impressed by the fact that the passage had been written hundreds of years before Jesus came, yet spoke so clearly of the event of the sufferings of Jesus on the cross. I must confess that I did not have a great sense of sin that burdened me, and neither, at the tender age of nineteen, did I feel the burden of mortality. In fact, I did not really feel the need of salvation, but what I did feel was that he loved me enough to suffer in such a way for me.

I suppose what touched me was an appreciation of grace. What is this grace? The classic description of it is unmerited favour, and certainly it was that which touched me. The heart of that is of course an attitude. It is an attitude which prompts a person to do something for another without their deserving it, or it having to be paid for. As such it is obviously related to love, and so can often be prompted by that love, but I am

conscious that God must surely find many people unlovely, even unlovable, and yet he still reaches out to them. Swindoll (1990:8) sees the word related to an old Hebrew term meaning to bend down or stoop. In fact, if people are essentially lovable, then grace to them is not so extreme; the element of being unmerited is not so intense. Donald Barnhouse writes that “love that goes upward is worship, love that goes outward is affection, love that stoops is grace”.

But why does God reach out in grace even to those who are unlovable? Part of the answer lies in that tremendous hymn, as it is often regarded, in Philippians 2. In a fulfilment of Isaiah 53, Jesus came and suffered, motivated by grace. But at the end of the hymn, in verse 11, comes a further motive, “for the joy set before him”. Can I suggest that this is not simply a reference to the joy that Jesus himself anticipated in his return to heaven? If that was all that motivated him, that was really a waste, for he surely had that joy before he came. He had gained nothing! Rather, although that is part of Jesus’ motive, there is more than that. The joy set before him included that of all who would be saved and transformed by what Jesus did. Thus Jesus came and died because it would then make those who accepted him worthwhile and lovable. He received a blessing in their new lives and relation to him.

This means that grace is significantly more than just a gracious attitude, wonderful though that is, but a positive action. We are saved by grace, which is a deed. It may be prompted by an attitude, but it is more than that. Our salvation is not just forgiveness, which is an attitude, but a transformation. Putting it another way, grace is not just an idea, but a reality of power. It does not just depend on what God has done, but what he continues to do by his grace. Piper (1995:162) points out that this is an ongoing experience; it is the love God “has” for us, not “had” (1 Jn 4:16).

A distinction must then be made between mercy and grace. An act of mercy is of not giving what a person deserves, while grace is giving what a person does not deserve. If a sinner, and that is all of us, receives mercy from God, the result is to have the punishment taken away, and not being sent to hell. Grace however is more than that; it includes mercy, but in addition it is the gift of much more, eternal life. Jeremiah (2006:23) includes a nice set of examples, such as in the story of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:23f), where mercy binds up the wounds, but grace pays the innkeeper. Mercy is then the act of forgiveness, resulting in justification, the declaration of righteousness; grace includes these, but goes much further.

The heart of the Gospel message is the revelation of the means by which we may receive grace. Even if people, such as, notably, Abraham, could be saved in the Old Testament period, and by exactly the same way as in the New, it was however in anticipation of how it was enacted. As such it was received in a much clearer exercise of faith; it is easier to believe as the means is demonstrated, which it was in the cross. Hence although there is a Hebrew word for “grace”, *chēn*, it is comparatively rare, certainly when put beside the Greek *charis*, which as often remarked, was hardly known before Christ. In comparison, the Hebrew “mercy”, *chesed*, is fairly common, both as a characteristic of God and as his desire for our attitude. Jones (1994:89) significantly cites Andersen, who says that it results in covenant, not comes from it. As such its meaning approaches that of “grace”.

I wonder then why as Christians we say grace before meals? Regrettably, it is a bit of a dying custom. I have naturally enough taken it as an attitude of thankfulness, and an appreciation that we should not just take our food for granted. Good, but again, is there more to the custom than that? Thought must naturally go to the Last Supper, and to Jesus’ words of being the bread of life, and to the vine (Jn 15). I do not want to be sacramental here, but there is surely an understanding that just as the bread and wine become part of our bodies, strengthening them, so our spiritual strength comes from our relationship. As Smith (2014:40) emphasises, abundant life rests in a person’s dwelling in Christ, and mutual life with him. Food and drink are, after all, things that give results. In this case, the “grace” is also a recognition of the empowering that we must have, and that our food provides, so perhaps it should be seen not just as thanks, but as recognition of a gift to be used in our bodies for action for the glory of God. Again therefore, grace includes the anticipation of change and development.

After the two years of general engineering at Cambridge, students specialised into a variety of options. My choice was easy; I had always been fascinated by aircraft and flying. My father had been in the Royal Air Force, and aircraft were part of my life. I did not want a train set, but built model aeroplanes. The essence of aircraft engineering is aerodynamics, which as the word indicates, is the power of the air, and this is indeed dynamic. If there is no interaction between the aircraft and the air, then it just does not fly. If the plane just sits in the air, it is hardly a plane at all, but once it moves and flies, it “lives”. Is that not us as well? If we simply sit in our eternal life, we are not really living as we could and should; the

grace gives us life, but life that is active. After all, our God is not just one who lives, but who does.

The fact of relationship indicates the freedom both of the giver and the one who receives. Grace cannot just be given as an absolute decree, hence God, while being absolutely sovereign, does not force. Being saved by faith, according to Wesley, implies choice (Wood 1975:219). Commenting on the theology of John Wesley, Wood (1975:215) points out that nobody sins by not having grace, but by not using it. Wesley affirmed salvation by grace, totally without earning by works; it is free in all and free for all (Wood 1975:214). There is nobody in whom God works irresistibly at all times, so all have often resisted the Holy Spirit (Wood 1975:217-8). Piper (1995:11) insists that the receipt of grace is conditional. Thus, emphatically, Wesley rejected any hint that grace demands predestination. On the other hand, there is nobody, “unless he has quenched the Spirit, that is wholly void of the grace of God” (Wood 1975:215).

It is then significant that the giving of grace is linked to relationship. Thus, in the Godhead, the giving of divinity is limited to the other two Persons. There is likewise a requirement of salvation, belonging to God, in order for a person to receive divine life. The same principle operates in human society, where the giving of grace is limited to the church, so those in relation to the giver as both belong to God. While charity is good, it is not part of the lifestyle of grace between those in the church. An application of this is that the priority of giving is not extended to a promiscuous lifestyle! It is not the giving of sexual intercourse to all who would accept it, but only to those in relation, so in marriage.

### **The cost of grace**

Now that we have retired, I like to take my wife out for Sunday lunch so she does not have to cook on that day. One place we went to recently was advertising a “special” which included a free drink. However, I observed that exactly the same dish was on the main menu, without the drink, and was a bit cheaper! That “free” drink was far from free and actually quite expensive. As somebody has said, there is no such thing as a free lunch; somebody has to pay. Quite often the one who gives covers the cost, but not unusually, as in the restaurant, it is the one who receives the “gift”.

In the case of salvation, the wonder is that in fact it does cost us nothing; for after all, how could we give God anything? Yet we then do find that there is in fact a cost to discipleship; we do lose our freedom and become

servants, better “slaves”, of God. Indeed, there is no such thing as a free lunch! Well worth it; we find this is a great bargain! Of course, our freedom is in any case not absolute, as there is much that restricts what we would like to do. Obedience to God is a restriction, although in his love we appreciate it is for the best. Marshall (1975:140) adds here that belief in prayer is also a belief in the restriction of freedom, as it is a request for God to intervene.

In fact, that loss of freedom is paralleled by God in his gift of grace. In the very act of creation there is a loss of his freedom, and in the giving of freedom to creation, and especially to humanity, God shares in the pain that wrong choices produce. Edwards (2003:157) is disturbed by the expression “free grace”; it is “offered to us at massive cost”, “grace for us meant hell for Jesus”. Edwards (2003:224) says that the tears of Jesus were “a true expression of the heart of God”. There is a traditional view that God is impassible, unable to suffer, but this is hardly consistent with the Biblical witness. Then perhaps more seriously, but gloriously, Christ bears our punishment so that justice is satisfied. The picture in a few places is that of redemption, where the picture, which includes the idea of buying freedom for a slave, includes the cost element.

### **Result of the fundamental: harmony**

What is the purpose of grace? Harmony. Grace is then given for the sake of the relating of the parties involved. It is a tradition with us, one which as with most aspects of life has become badly corrupted, that a relationship is enhanced by giving. Right through the Bible, and perhaps especially clear in the Old Testament, was the sacrificial system, the act of giving reflecting the covenant with God. It is this that highlights the fact that each of these is fundamentally relational. The salvation of people is not just a once-off event, but a person is saved, has spiritual life, only by relating to God. Why is this so important? Life is essentially relational, so the ideal life is where there is harmony between those people and things relating. Thus the grace that God gives to us in salvation is to give a relationship with him. It is this that enables our eternal life. Just as our ordinary biological life is essentially an inter-relating of the various parts of the body, so now in addition we relate to God as well.

The event of the cross, an act of grace, made this relating to God possible, but what saves is the relating, the continued interaction of grace. A person lives in interrelating; essentially this is what life is, which, in an animal, is by the blood (Lev 17:11), the means of the interaction in the body. Eternal

life is the relating to God; hence the injunction to be filled, constantly, with the Spirit (Eph 5:18), for he is the enabler of that relating. Then the essence of the Trinity is the interactive relating of the three Persons seen in the *perichōrēsis* of the Persons. They are not simply with each other in a static way, but there is a dynamism, enabled by the eternal interchange between the Persons. It must follow from this that God's ideal for people in his image is the interaction between those people, which is then facilitated by acts of grace between them. Indeed, full relationship, harmony, when each relates fully to the other, is when each gives fully, so in grace, and of course, when this grace is received. The ideal human society, from a single couple and onwards, could only be experienced when all act in harmony. This is enabled by the grace that each shows to others, and receives from them.

Rather than "harmony", the Bible tends to use another key word, "peace". This immediately needs a little clarification, for although it is a common word, it usually lacks the distinctive concept that Christianity gives to it. It is certainly a desirable feature of life, and much sought after, but tends to have only the negative nuance of a lack of trouble or of strife. In contrast, the Christian understanding of the word comes more from the Hebrew "shalom"; the great majority of its occurrences are rendered "peace", but which add a positive aspect of interaction. In this sense, the word can well be translated as "harmony", as this adds this concept of action.

The actual word "harmony" does not occur at all in the old Authorised Version of the Bible, and is rare in my preferred Revised Standard Version, only appearing three times, two of which translate the words *to auto* (Rom 12:16, 15:5), and the third (Col 3:14) is really an addition for clarification, there being no actual word. The RSV Apocrypha does contain the word another four times. These translate *sumperipheromenoi* (agree together, Ecclus 25:1) *homonoian* (2 Macc 3:21), *sumphōne* (4 Macc 7:7), *philadelphia* (4 Macc 13:25) and *sumphōnōs*, *sumphōnon*, (4 Macc 14, 6,7). Here it will be immediately obvious that the most usual word is the one from which we get the word "symphony". In these pieces of music, the basic point is that the different instruments interact in unity without losing their individuality. Perhaps, although not really relevant, harmony between individuals has a lot to do with the sounds that they make! The Christian ethic is that people live not just in unity but harmony.

Paul indicates that there will be an end to the process of change (1 Cor 15:22f). This end will be after the coming of Christ, the *parousia*, (1 Cor 15:24), an event which was foretold by Christ, although he did not give a

time for this (Matt 24:36). There will be a reverse of the Fall of Eden, so the full harmony of the Garden will be restored. Then, not surprisingly, because what happens in the world is both caused by God and is a reflection of him, there will be a restoration of the full harmony in the Godhead (1 Cor 15:28).

## A WORLD OF “UNGRACE”

A description of grace stands in stark contrast to the situation in the world, that which is experienced day by day. Even if there is some grace in the world, it is comparatively rare and occasional. The normal stands in contrast; it is not so much that of grace, but of “ungrace”. This means that in the world there is great division. On the one hand the common experience that we all have is of ungrace, with just the occasional experience of grace, which then adds to the contrast. What a delight to find those who seek to run their lives in accordance with grace. It is those, of course, who know the God whose very nature is of grace.

The start of the Biblical narrative climaxes in the creation of the human couple “in the image of God” (Gen 1:26). Much effort has been expended in suggesting what this means, but one aspect of this follows very quickly, for a fundamental aspect of deity is that he is totally free. The very nature of God is freedom; nobody is able to compel him to do anything, and an aspect of being in the image is that people likewise have that freedom, the ability to choose. It was this, that to an extent, was given to the first couple, and in this they reflected the nature of God. Tragically, the result of this was something that was totally contrary to the nature of God, and had a bad result; the couple, although they were the image that God had created, very soon fell into a state of sin. That power of choice was used to depart from what God had explicitly commanded. At the same time, they made the choice of attempting to image God in another way as well, for the serpent persuaded the couple that if they complied with his suggestion, then they would be like God themselves, “knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:5).

How ironic! For this desire, effectively to usurp God, is at the heart of sin, the antithesis of God. Ellul, perceptively, points out that “sin is not the failure to obey a morality. It is the very desire to determine that morality independently of God” (Gill 2000:63). As soon as we seek to define what is right, we replace God, we become idolatrous, and so sin.

Indeed, Augustine, mistranslating the *eph hō* of Romans 5:12 as “in Adam” rather than “like Adam”, then believed that sin was inherent and inevitable. In this he followed Aristotle, who believed that “none of the



moral virtues is engendered in us by nature” (Lohse 1991:2). One result was the marring of the image and the inability to do good, or, some feel, even to choose it (Lake 1975:34). This may well be doubtful, but in practice, in a fallen world, still effectively the case. Nevertheless, although being deeply influenced from the world around, we can choose and so are still responsible; as Neibuhr says, “we sin inevitably but not necessarily” (Lake 1975:35). This does contrast with the view of the Jews, who, as seen at the extreme in the Pharisees, felt that the commandments could in fact be kept (Lohse 1991:13).

What the couple in the garden was doing was to try to act for their own benefit, to elevate themselves. It is this that is of the essence of sin. As such it is entirely opposite to the attitude of grace that motivates acts for the benefit of others. Entirely in keeping with this, the Genesis narrative moves from the creation and fall to the murder of Abel by Cain. Cain could not stand the suggestion that his brother was better than him; he rejected the attitude of humility that is foundational to grace.

Thereafter, human society has been dominated by this desire to act for one’s own benefit, to magnify oneself, effectively to usurp the prerogative of God to oneself. An obvious example, following very early in the narrative, is the building of the tower of Babel, no help to anybody else at all, but a powerful expression of the pride that is the opposite to grace. Verhey (1984:17) explains why he entitles his book on New Testament ethics *The great reversal*; he says that in Christianity, “the conventional value and security of wealth is challenged and discarded”. Rather than trusting the usual patterns of privilege, power, prestige or security, the call of the Christian Faith is to trust grace (Verhey 1984:18). Horton (2002:14) here comments that the modern ethos, even so common in the church, is on self-esteem and pride. He could well have added that this includes the wider context, for wealth is viewed as for one’s own benefit, and the usual motive for action is to benefit oneself. In contrast, following from the mandate given to the primal couple before the fall, Christian action should be motivated by giving, service to others. It should be natural that an appreciation of having received leads to a desire to give back, and especially in service. In any case, an attitude of sacrifice follows when God is seen to be able to give so much; all we can give is already his.

Since the Fall, the essential motive for human activity has followed the same pattern. The fundamental motive for action is of benefitting oneself. The history of the world has adopted precisely the opposite to grace, with predictable results; Yancey (1997) frequently uses the term “ungrace”. We

live in an entropic world; the natural state of the world is increasing disharmony and its culmination in death. There is, inevitably, disease, sin, oppression and so much else. The world is no longer good. Moltmann (2012:134) then sees the ecologic crisis as due to pride and the will to rule. Grace is available, but if not received, then the inevitable happens.

In fact, the world cannot be motivated by grace as this depends on reflecting the mind of God, so on conversion; the ethos of the world is compelled by, or appeals to, selfishness. Once God is dethroned, the next most important thing becomes prior, and this effectively becomes the centre of life and worship. But selfishness cannot really motivate morals. In total contrast, the Christian life is motived by grace. Jacques Ellul goes so far as to say that the New Testament teaches no such thing as a "Judeo-Christian ethic". It demands conversion and then this, "Be perfect ... as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Yancey 1997:251, who comments that no government could enact a set of laws based on the Sermon on the Mount). Likewise Chafer (1928:84) says that the Bible makes no appeal to the unsaved for a betterment of life. God does not reform sinners, but remakes them.

The world just does not, cannot, follow the way of Christ. There is no way in which nations, populated by people whose concern is far from that of Jesus, would follow an ethic of grace. Their fundamental method is precisely the opposite, that of power. Neibuhr (1956:9) points out that society tries to achieve a tolerable justice, but by managing and balancing competing interests and forces; he says that "love may be the motive of social action, but that justice must be the instrument of love in a world in which self-interest is bound to defy the canons of love on every level". "In the field of collective behaviour, the force of egotistic passion is so strong that the only harmonies possible are those which seek to neutralize this force through balances of power, through mutual defences against its inordinate expression, and through techniques for harnessing its energy to social ends" (Neibuhr 1956:128).

It is often argued that progress is made in the world by competition, so of one group standing up to, and overcoming its competitors. Here this opinion is often justified by appeal to the mechanism of evolution. As it well-known, especially since Darwin, the accepted view is that animals and plants have developed by a process of competition and the survival of the fittest. If, as is normal, a mutation has emerged in a species, and if it is better than others, it will gradually overcome and replace them. Then, in due course, a further mutation emerges in that population, and the process

repeats. However, while there is a considerable body of evidence for change within species, there is none that it has resulted in new ones. Then most significantly, the commonly held opinion is that evolution applies to lots of other things as well as the biological. The theory has perhaps been particularly attractive to those who desire an alternative explanation for reality apart from that of creation.

It must immediately be said that evolution does not provide an adequate explanation for reality as it gives no explanation for why things exist, but only for change in them. Perhaps it should just be added that the scientific evidence is for a real beginning to things, and that this is unlikely to be long enough ago for evolution to be a reasonable possibility. Evolution also gives no valid explanation for the start of the interaction that is life. So although it is strongly believed that evolution is the underlying mechanism for improvement, this has not actually been proved.

Importantly, if evolution were correct, it would indicate that good emerges from the competition between things and from the destruction and elimination of some to be replaced by superior ones. What may be seen as bad has a good result overall. It is a small step to a Nazi view and the deliberate elimination of those perceived, or felt to be, inferior, for the sake of the eventual and overall benefit of all.

In this case, showing grace to the weak would be wrong as it is ultimately to the detriment of all. It must however be commented here that compassion to, and care for, the weak, has been a universally accepted Christian attitude. Interestingly, Moltmann (2012:127) cites recent research that indicates that in nature the principle of co-operation is actually more successful than that of competition. Grace is good for all! As he says, "united we stand, divided we fall". Certainly I am very struck by the waste and damage generated by competition and fighting; it is actually not essential to life and progress at all, rather the opposite.

Practically therefore, the way of Jesus is such that his ethic is only accepted in a regenerate community, so in the Church, where the way of life should be one of harmony and contrasts dramatically with that of the world as a whole. Smith (2014:132) writes that nobody is naturally loving. Here Verhey (1984:144) comments that in John, the command is to love one another, not the neighbour or enemy, but immediately explains that this focuses on the community. Significantly, he bases this on John's interest in the unity of the Father and the Son, and the unity of the Son and community in a hostile world. He further explains that loving the brother

means love for fellow Christians (eg 1 Jn 3:13 etc) (Verhey 1984:146). Likewise, Gill (2000:89) points out that it was when the disciples came to him that Jesus proclaimed the sermon on the mount; "this is an ethic for people in relationship to him, not directly transferable to those without such a relationship". In Jesus' well-known illustration of the houses on the rock and the sand (Matt 7:24f), a good life can only be built on a solid foundation, which is of course the relation to Christ. Here of course, important though that foundation is, it is not the house!

It is here that the ethic of Jesus comes in for great criticism, for it is obvious that it just cannot work in the world as it is. It requires an attitude that is totally opposite to the norm. The ethic of Jesus is often admired as a wonderful ideal, but rejected as impracticable. Some, such as Albert Schweitzer, believed it was an "interim ethic", only meant for the immediate short period before the kingdom of God was brought in fully (Lohse 1991:66). Many, especially those from a state church background, also believe that the action of a specifically Christian ethic is not for society but for the actions of individuals to individuals. That does not affect society as a whole, except very marginally. They then have often made a distinction between this and the action of society as a whole. This has meant that although Christians do participate in the latter, as citizens they follow the norms of society. Luther is an example of this approach; he felt that the ethic of Jesus is only for private life (Verhey 1984:7). It is this that underlies the teaching of Luther, following Augustine, that there are two basic systems of ethics (Pannenberg 1981:7), the "two kingdoms".

The way of Jesus has two great precepts, loving God and the neighbour, both of which are by acting in grace. The second of these is fundamentally social, so the way of Jesus must affect the way in which people live together. After all, Jesus did proclaim the kingdom, which is surely not just at an individual level. For Christians there is a call to follow the message of self-giving love, but this is impossible for those outside the kingdom. For them, human conduct is governed by the rule of law and justice, and the role of Christians is to support that. Neibuhr (1956:146) comments that no theologian understood the impossibility of the law of love in a world of sin better than Luther did. Calvin understood that Christians are concerned with justice in society, seeking to uphold it, but emphatically should be ruling, when in government, for the public good and not their own interest (Foster 1981:63). This is of course in an attitude of personal grace and humility.

Pannenberg (1981:115) here draws attention to a problem in this. Following Troelsch, he says that a Christian, living in two spheres, operates a double standard. As a Christian, he or she acts in love, and especially accepts injustice, but as a citizen uses the means of law to uphold justice. Government is after all a gift of God's grace, so to be obeyed (Rom 13:1f); interestingly however, Lohse (1991:133) even points out that there is no word in Romans 13:1-7 that is specifically Christian. Is it hardly surprising that Christians have found this difficult and so either opted out of the world or neglected the ethic of Jesus? Nevertheless, as with the prophets, the message of God so often has had a profound effect, even when far from being fully adopted. What is vital is the realisation that any effect, even a foreshadowing, is only possible by God's action, so of grace (Pannenberg 1981:151).

Luther is then well-known for holding the duality in a Christian life (cf Jones 1984:68f). For him, a Christian is *simul iustus et peccator*, "at the same time justified and a sinner". This has a primary reference to personal salvation; a person is justified, having received the righteousness of God by imputation, so is holy. However, not being fully sanctified, a person still sins (McGrath 1997:442). However, the phrase is then applicable in a second way. As an individual, a person can follow the way of Christ and live by grace, but this is not possible socially, so then participates in the practices of a sinful world. Following this distinction, some would then feel that, for example, they could serve in warfare, feeling that their contribution could well shorten the war and so reduce the suffering involved. There has indeed been a long Christian tradition of justifying the waging of a "just war" (cf Moltmann 2012:196); practice and experience have however persuaded many that this is an impossibility in a sinful world. As is well-known, Bonhoeffer participated in the attempt to assassinate Hitler, doing what as an individual he knew was wrong, but aiming for ultimate good.

Immediately after graduating from Cambridge, I worked for a while in the Royal Aircraft Establishment at Farnborough in Britain. My particular work was not directly aimed at benefitting the military, in fact it was on helicopters, but I had several dedicated Christian colleagues also working effectively on weapons; the rationale was that good weaponry deters war. Here the Lutheran distinction is often seen as a fiction and hypocritical, even contributing to the Nazi success (Jones 1984:69). The classic example is the nuclear bomb, which is seen as a deterrent, and indeed it probably did prevent a further war between the big powers after 1945 (cf Moltmann 2012:198). An extreme of this view is for Christians to have

direct involvement in the political process, so trying to get society to do good. William Wilberforce worked assiduously in the British Parliament until slavery, with all its horrors, was finally abolished. However, Pannenberg (1981:9) can assert that for faith there is no provision for politics to be independent of the kingdom, which must result in its opposition to it; "God's judgment is directed against the arrogance of the world". Ultimately however, the system of the world will not be modified to perfection, but will be destroyed. As with a human being, if there is no grace, then there is no life, and the final end is death.

Thus while some do believe in the applicability of Jesus' ethic to the whole of life, many limit it to the Church. An example is the Anabaptists (Verhey 1984:7), another is the Methodists; Wesley's "theology of love" is often attacked as a perfectionist ideal (Dieter 1987:29). It is notable that such groups generally stress the total separation and distinction of the Church from the rest of society. Dieter (1987:30) points out that the word "sanctification" is derived from the Latin translation of the Hebrew *qadash*, which means to separate or divide. Thus the ethic of Jesus is separate from that of the world, and in a community separate from the world.

The contrast with the world has meant that many Christians have opted out of it completely, and tried to live out the way of Jesus in a community separate from the world. In this case the kingdom of God is far from a political identity; Jesus said that his kingdom was not of this world. The ideal adopted by many churches is that they are comprised only of Christians, so that of "regenerate church membership", an impossible goal, but which in any case fails as the Christians themselves are far from perfect. There has been some success in separation, but it has never lasted, simply because nobody has been fully sanctified; all sin. Disruption naturally appears in all groups. Sadly, Foster (1981:32) is compelled to ask how far even those who claim to be Christian are following Jesus' way.

Regenerate church membership is not only motivated by the desire for holiness and so freedom from contamination from others and their ideas and sin. It must also rest on the exclusivity of God. Christians are unique as they are in relation to the God who himself is unique. A non-Christian serves another authority, and so cannot be in relation to the holy God. Coupled with this is the point that to be a member of the Church in this sense demands personal holiness. This is impossible in the full sense in this world, but is given through grace in justification by faith. It follows that most churches of this nature practise adult baptism, usually by