

# **The Grace Debate**

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*Revised & Expanded*

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## Chapter 1

## The Grace Boys

I know a little about God's grace. I've experienced God's grace in Christ in my own life. I've written three books with grace in the title.<sup>1</sup> I've written an entire book on the *solas*.<sup>2</sup> I've preached grace as an ordained minister for 28 years. Yet I am disturbed by certain ministries that *only* preach grace. They proclaim no other message. They know no other motive for the Christian life. They recognize no other gospel, and insist that any formulation of the gospel that differs from their own is no gospel at all.

Essentially what the grace boys preach is this: *sanctification by realization*. Realize what Christ has done for you; realize His great love; realize His costly sacrifice; realize His gracious gift of salvation; realize your adoption and your security in Christ; realize the ongoing gift of the Spirit of Christ and His power for sanctification; realize all this and you will have all the motive you need to enter and sustain the Christian life. When we succumb to temptation, or when we indulge our lust, when we bow to the idols of materialism and success, when we act selfishly or fail to love it is a sign that we need *more* gospel. No, we don't need to be scolded (what the Bible calls "rebuked") or warned or reminded of our duty, or threatened. No, no, no. When we indulge carnality and worldliness we don't need LAW (a very scary word in these circles). We need to hear more, ever more about God's love, His grace, His gifts, His Christ. Contemplate again your justification. This is the key to sanctification. This *alone* will provide the proper incentive to live the Christian life.

Is there a problem with this? Indeed there is. The grace boys are being one-sided in a realm in which they need to be multi-sided. Undoubtedly they have identified the *central* motivation for the Christian life. Love mixed with gratitude is a powerful incentive. When we realize what God in Christ has done how can we *not* want to please, honor, and serve Him in return? Those who (realize that they) are forgiven much love much (Lk 7:47). We can even say that love/gratitude is the *highest* motivation for Christian living.

### Multiple motivations

What we can't say is that love/gratitude is the Christian's *only* valid motivation. Not by a long shot. What might be another valid motivation? *Fear*. "Conduct yourselves with fear," says the Apostle Peter (1 Pet 1:17). "It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God," the writer to the Hebrews warns (Heb 10:31). "Terrifying?" Is this a part of the vocabulary of the justified? Apparently so. Any others? Sure. *Threats*. God motivates church members by threatening them. He does this in Scripture all the time. In that great Epistle of Justification, Galatians, the Apostle Paul warns the church that those who practice the deeds of the flesh "shall not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal 5:19-21). He threatens the same to the Corinthians (1 Cor

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<sup>1</sup> Terry L. Johnson, *When Grace Comes Home: How the Doctrines of Grace Change Your Life* (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2000, 2003, 2007); *When Grace Transforms* (Ross-Shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2002, 2008); *When Grace Comes Alive: Living Through the Lord's Prayer* (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Terry L. Johnson, *The Case for Traditional Protestantism: The Solas of the Reformation* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2004).

5:9, 10). Threatening professing believers (it is to them that he is writing) with exclusion from heaven is a powerful incentive to obedience, is it not?

The *holiness of God* is meant to motivate us. We are to be holy because God is holy (Lev 11:44ff; 1 Pet 1:15,16). His holiness is an incentive for our own. Yes, the cross is a great motivator for the Christian. So also is the holiness of God. The *goodness* of God, not just His grace, is also meant to motivate us. Because God causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust, we are also meant to be good to all (Mt 5:43-48). *Warnings* play a significant role in the motivations for obedience throughout the Sermon on the Mount (e.g. Mt 5:21-48; 7:21-23). Both the promise of *rewards* (Mt 5:3-12; 2 Tim 2:5,6; 4:8) and the threat of *punishments* (1 Cor 3:12-15; 4:18-21) are valid incentives for Christian living.

### **Exhortations**

What about the countless exhortations to do and go and be (not just “realize”), but actually mortify, even crucify the flesh, die to self, put on the new man, and be filled with Christ’s Spirit (Rom 6:12ff; 8:12ff; Gal 5:24; 2:20; Eph 4:22f; 5:18ff; etc.)? Certainly we are exhorted in light of who Christ is and what Christ has done (e.g. Rom 12ff follow Rom 1:1-11; Eph 3-6 follows Eph 1 & 2). However, the facts of redemption are not endlessly repeated (as though the problem were, oops, I forgot again! Please remind me. What has Jesus done for me?), or worse, used to nullify the threats, warnings, and exhortations of Scripture.

The grace boys seem to recognize none of this. Human beings, even redeemed human beings, are complex. God uses a variety of means to motivate us. He uses carrots. He uses sticks. The richness is lost and the whole counsel of God is buried when the grace formula is imposed on every text of Scripture. In fact, distressing volumes of preaching in our day, even in our ecclesiastical circles, has become predictable, cliché, and boring. All of the Bible’s sharp edges have been blunted, ignored, or explained away in the name of grace preaching.

Simply put, it ain’t so. Oh, we’d love to think that none of the hundreds of warnings, threats, and exhortations apply to us. We’d love to believe that the Apostles never appeal to duty, hard work, sacrifice, and fear. We’d love to think we were beyond rewards and punishments. Yet we aren’t and they do. We don’t do anyone any favors when we hide these biblical appeals in the name of preaching grace. We’re not sanctified merely by realization, unless we include the realization that we’re about to “get slapped upside the head,” as we used to say, if we don’t shape up. Realization, mortification, vivification, study, prayer, discipline, and consistent attendance at public services are all necessary ingredients in a successful and fruitful approach to the Christian life.

## Chapter 2

## The Grace Balance

Let's imagine Joe Bloggs, ruling elder at a local conservative Presbyterian church. One day Joe decides he likes his secretary more than his wife, leaves the latter and moves in with the former. What message does Joe need to hear? Some would say he needs more gospel. He needs to be told how much Christ has done for him. He needs more grace, more of God's love, more of Christ's beauty set before him.

### More gospel

Maybe that's what he needs to hear. The Apostle Paul does tell the wayward Corinthians, "You were bought with a price. Therefore, glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:20). The cross also is planted on the center of the Apostle Paul's moral instruction in Philippians 2:5ff ("have this attitude in you which is also in Christ Jesus"), in 1 John 4:10,11 (in this is love . . . ought we also to love one another"), and in 1 Peter 2:21ff ("follow in His steps"). Jesus is our model and inspiration. The beauty of Christ and His cross motivates us to live lives of love, sacrifice, obedience, and submission to God.

### Warnings

We're not denying that "more gospel" is part of our approach to Mr. Bloggs. Of course, it is. However, it is not the only response, or even the typical response of the Apostles, particularly when direct dealing is required. We have plenty of examples of bad behavior in the epistles. How do the Apostles respond? The Apostle Paul turns the wayward "so-called brother" of 1 Corinthians 5 over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh that his spirit might be saved (i.e., he appears to be a real, if wayward believer) and then warns others that may be tempted to indulge the flesh that those who do so "shall not inherit the Kingdom of God" (1 Cor 6:9). He warns that those who think they stand to take heed lest they fall, as did Israel before them (1 Cor 10:1-12). Those who desecrate the Lord's Supper are threatened with judgment and warned that some were sick already and some had died because of indiscretions (1 Cor 11:23-32). The Apostle Paul does not hesitate to warn Christians of temporal judgments if they persist, unrepentant, in their sin. The Thessalonians are urged to abstain from sexual immorality and warned "the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you" (1 Thess 4:3-7).

Let me pause: what might the "grace only" preachers do with this passage, except ignore it or explain it away? This is very strong language to use with the redeemed. Neither do I see another way to read it. The Apostle Paul is warning the Thessalonian Christians that God is an *avenger* of Christian misdeeds, is he not? We continue. He warns the Galatians not to turn grace into an opportunity for the flesh. He invokes the law of sowing and reaping—apparently Christians are not exempt from this law—warning that God will not be mocked (Gal 5:13–6:16). James warns those who claim faith, but have no works that "faith without works is dead," that is, no faith at all (Jas 2:14-26). The Apostle Peter warns that "judgment begin(s) with the household of God" and "it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved" (1 Pet 4:17, 18). Making our way to another Apostle, John warns that those who say they know God yet don't keep the commandments are liars, and devoid of the truth (1 Jn 2:3-5). Further, if they don't love they don't know God (1 Jn 4:8ff; 2:9-11; 3:11-24). The writer of the Hebrews scorches his readers, that is, members of the church to which he is writing who may be tempted to apostasize. He writes, "if we go on sinning

willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment, and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries” (Heb 10:26, 27). He warns of God’s vengeance and judgment saying, “It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb 10:31). We could multiply these examples again and again (e.g. Phil 3; Titus 1:10-16; 3:9, 10, 2 Pet 2, 3; 2 Jn and 3 Jn; Jude 4ff; Rev 1-3). This is rough language to use with the redeemed, would we not all agree? Yet use it the New Testament writers do.

### **Imbalance**

It is not that these passages are unknown to the “grace only” preachers, rather the problem is a nearly complete failure to incorporate the Apostles’ concerns, found in text after text, into everyday preaching and pastoral practice. The Apostles’ warnings about faith without works, knowledge without obedience or love, grace excusing license, habitual carnality, antinomianism and apostasy are trumped by the desire to “preach grace.” Ironically the Apostles, the original authors of grace, are being improved upon by well-meaning but misguided preachers of truncated grace. The Apostles’ exhortations, warnings, cautions, and threats are being silenced by those who claim to be their heirs. They will allow only words of comfort and assurance for professing believers who are worldly, carnal, immoral, and loveless. This they insist upon in defiance of all apostolic precedent. Can we not agree that what the Apostles teach is completely compatible with the doctrines of grace and indeed that their warnings, etc., are the necessary companions of those doctrines, properly understood? Moreover, can we not also say that those warnings are themselves a matter of grace, of God not immediately disciplining us because of our sin but rather patiently continuing to call us back from the path of destruction?

### **Apostolic standard**

If the Apostles can warn professing believers, members of the visible church, of judgment, divine vengeance, fiery terror, and punishment, can Christian preachers today do any less? Should not the full force of these exhortations, warnings, threats be felt by believers today, without dying the death of a thousand qualifications, without it being explained how these passages, after all, in the end, really don’t apply to us? Do the Apostles not use this language, despite the doctrine of justification by faith alone, despite our eternal security, because there is something salutary in our hearing it and pondering the condition of our souls, that is, in examining ourselves, in making our calling and election sure (2 Cor 12:5; 2 Pet 1:10)? These gracious warnings must be taught and preached in biblical proportions and with biblical balance.

Should true believers be worried? Not at all. Not in the least. Who should be? *Professing* believers who habitually practice, characteristically practice, defiantly practice, practice as a matter of lifestyle, the things against which the Apostles’ warn.

Back to Joe Bloggs. He may have a defective understanding of grace, Christ, and the gospel. He may just need “more gospel.” On the other hand, he may know the gospel well and have decided to indulge his flesh anyway, just because he wants to, just because he thinks he can get away with it. He may be a genuine, but wayward Christian at ease in Zion. Or he may be a “false professor” as yet unconverted. Either way, God uses both the threats of fire as well as the promises of bliss to arrest his attention and bring him more perfectly to Christ.

## Chapter 3

## Assurance

Are those who are concerned about the spreading of the “grace only” message opposed to eternal security? Are those who insist that the biblical warnings be preached to professing believers denying that Christians can have the assurance of their salvation? If we might cite the Apostle Paul, “may it never be!”

Assurance, confidence, a sense of safety and security in the presence of God and in the face of eternity is a birthright of all true believers. Whole sectors of Christendom deny this. Denominations with Arminian and Pelegian tendencies see assurance as dangerous. For them it smacks of spiritual pride and breeds carnal complacency. Our view is the opposite. Assurance of salvation is based not on our personal spiritual attainments but on what Christ has done. It has nothing to do with spiritual pride. Assurance of salvation secures a believer in the enveloping hands of the Father and the Son, and so provides the foundation for the highest motivation for holiness and service, that of loving gratitude (Jn 10:28-30). “These things I have written . . . that you may know that you have eternal life,” the Apostle John says, using similar language in his gospel (1 Jn 5:13; cf. Jn 20:31). Assurance, says the English Puritan Thomas Brooks (1608–1630) is “heaven on earth.” For Thomas Watson (c. 1620-1686), it is “the first fruits of paradise” (*A Body of Divinity*, 256).

### Means

How may one have assurance? Traditionally, Reformed Protestants have identified three ways.

1. The *promises of God*, which simply are to be trusted (e.g. Jn 3:16).
2. The “*signs of grace*,” that is, the signs of gospel transformation, which confirm conversion. (Nearly all of 1 John is written in this mode; see also the concluding section of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 7:16-23.)
3. The *inward testimony of the Holy Spirit* bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God (Rom 8:16).

Reformed Protestants have taught both that true believers are *eternally secure*, that nothing can separate them from the love of Christ (Rom 8:28ff; Jn 10:27-29), and that they can know that they are eternally secure, that is, that they can have *assurance*.

Assurance, according to our *Westminster Standards*, along with the “several benefits” of redemption (such as peace and joy), “accompany or flow from” justification, adoption, and sanctification. One must know that one is justified and adopted to have assurance, peace, and joy. One must also be experiencing progress in sanctification (*Shorter Catechism*, #36). Assurance, in this context, is expected and unexceptional. What we have *not* taught is that assurance necessarily comes easily. I’m not aware of when evangelicals in America came to think that assurance should be automatic and instantaneous for every professing believer. I do know that the “Four Spiritual Laws” of Campus Crusade for Christ encouraged an almost mechanical process of believing the promises (and not calling God a liar by failing to do so!) which was meant to result in immediate assurance. Not so fast, our Reformed ancestors would

have urged. *Some* may find that assurance comes that easily. For *some* it comes concurrent with the moment of faith. However, instantaneous and perpetual assurance in every circumstance should not be seen as the norm. Why not? Our confessional standards may help broaden our perspective.

### **Caution**

First, there is the problem of *self-deception*. There are “hypocrites and other unregenerate men” who may “vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favor of God and estate of salvation.” These self-deceived persons must be taken into account by the ministry of the church, their vain hopes not reinforced or left unchallenged by its preaching (*WCF*, XVIII.1).

Second, there is the problem of the *process* to find assurance. Assurance “does not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties, before he be a partaker of it” (*WCF*, XVIII.3). Certain souls of tender conscience are going to struggle no matter how much grace the church preaches. The church cannot warp its message in order to accommodate the sensitivities of these fragile souls, though it does sympathize and offer its counsel.

Third, there is the problem of *carnality*. True believers can have their assurance “shaken, diminished, and intermitted.” How? “As by negligence in preserving of it, by falling into some special sin which woundeth the conscience and grieveth the Spirit; by some sudden or vehement temptation” (*WCF*, XVIII.4). “Guilt clips the wings of comfort,” says Thomas Watson, who also urges, “If you would have assurance, be much in exercise of grace. Let us lie at the pool of the ordinances,” he insists, “and frequent the word and sacrament” (*A Body of Divinity*, 257-258). Negligence (skipping church, abandoning prayer, Bible reading, etc.), sin, and sudden temptation can rob a believer of his or her assurance. Of the last of these, the Confession teaches that though believers can never fall from a state of justification, “yet they may, by their sins, fall under God’s fatherly displeasure, and not have the light of his countenance restored unto them, until they humble themselves, confess their sins, beg pardon, and renew their faith and repentance” (*WCF*, XI.5).

Further, there is the problem of what the Puritans called “desertions.” of “God’s withdrawing the light of His countenance, and suffering even such as fear him to walk in darkness and to have no light” (*WCF*, XVIII.4). The Assembly’s divines denied that any sin necessarily was involved, and attributed “desertions” to the sovereign and inscrutable purposes of God. Assurance, then, may for some be attained only over time and only with difficulty. At the same time, the Confession teaches through “the right use of ordinary means” all believers may be enabled by the Spirit to enjoy full assurance of salvation (*WCF*, XVIII.3; LC.80, 81).

### **Pastoral**

### **balance**

The church’s ministry must take all of this into account. It must *encourage* assurance among the faithful and *discourage* assurance among the unconverted and self-deceived. It must recognize the difficulty and even undesirability of assurance for disobedient and rebellious Christians, while reassuring genuine believers who struggle to find peace. This means its ministry must comfort and encourage as well as warn and threaten, if it is to faithfully preach the whole gospel

to the whole body of professing believers. It is a fine line that we walk. No doubt there are those who would like only to hear unambiguous affirmations of assurance for all who profess to believe: words of comfort, words of grace, words of unconditional acceptance to soothe the troubled conscience. Yet the church cannot do this without shirking its responsibility to professing yet nominal, or carnal, or negligent, or self-deceived members of the visible church, which constitute no small part of its ministry at any given time. There will always be those who “profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him” (Titus 1:16). Sound pastoral ministry will challenge them, even as it comforts others.

“Cheap grace” is the term that Dietrich Bonhoeffer coined to describe false grace, which he perceived in the persistent promise of grace wrongly extended by the church to those who had forfeited a claim to it. Like who? Like those professing believers who by false doctrines or persistent bad behavior could no longer make a credible claim to genuine faith. When I first came to Reformed convictions this concept was a lifeline for me, adrift in Arminian evangelism, surrounded by countless professing Christians who’d walked the aisle, signed a card, and prayed a prayer, who were sure they were saved, though they lived like the devil’s own. The Reformed insistence on linking sanctification with justification answered the problem of cheap grace and “easy believism.” The justified will be sanctified. Those not being sanctified have not been justified. It is so clear. How is it that Reformed people have gotten confused on so basic an issue? Or perhaps more accurately, why is it that in some circles there is desperate concern to correct the *legalism* of fundamentalism yet little concern to correct its even more pervasive *anti-nomianism*? For the church continually to preach grace and more grace in the face of heretical doctrines or runaway immorality among its members is to turn grace into a license for sin and proclaim a false gospel (Gal 5:13; Jude 4; 1 Pet 2:16).

**Tension**

We have discussed the tension in the New Testament between the need on the one hand to assure genuine believers of their safety in Christ and on the other hand to warn professing but counterfeit believers of their danger. The tension is complicated by the fact that it is often difficult to distinguish between true and false believers and further complicated because the latter may even think they are genuine when in fact they are self-deceived.

It may help to elaborate further on these categories of church members. What is meant to be the effect of biblical preaching upon professing believers? A proverbial answer is “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” The details might look like this:

1. Assure the faithful
2. Strengthen the weak
3. Caution the complacent
4. Warn the disobedient
5. Threaten the defiant

These five categories of professing believers (particularly our current concern, categories 3-5) are given an abundance of space in the New Testament. The Apostles, as we have seen, give them considerable attention.

Take Sarah Bloggs, Joe’s wife. Sarah was saved as a teenager. Yet she is the town’s biggest gossip. Her tongue is the world of iniquity and set on fire by hell (see Jas 3:3ff). She is cruel, even vicious, though also witty with her tongue. Should she be unsettled by biblical preaching? Shouldn’t it provoke some self-evaluation? Might it prove salutary for her to hear words of caution, warnings, and even threats?

## Transformation

The “grace only” advocates that we identified in previous months seem altogether oblivious to these common New Testament concerns and their implications for preaching and pastoral ministry. Behind the apostolic preaching is the confidence that Christ not only saves, He transforms. Believers are regenerated, given a new heart and a new nature, vividly described in death/life terms in Romans 6. Moreover, believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. When this double dynamic is present, gospel power is active in creating the new life of the believer: the old passes away and all things become new (2 Cor 5:17, Rom 12:1, 2). Sanctification follows justification.

What about when the life isn’t changed, when Christ is claimed but no transformation takes place, when the old ways, habits, lusts, idols persist? The credibility of one’s profession of Christ is called into question. Jesus said, “you will know them by their fruit” (Mt 7:16,20). Hence, the urgent New Testament warnings to the complacent, the disobedient, and the hypocritical.

The extent of the problem is entirely missed by “grace only” preaching. Hypocrites, “false professors,” as the Puritans called them, and the self-deceived, all professing believers, all members of the visible church, have to be taken into account in the church’s preaching even as they are in the Apostles’ epistles. They must be accommodated in apostolic proportions, as well. The church will always be filled with tares that appear as wheat. The church will always find growing in its fields visible plants in rocky/shallow soil, which for a time appear healthy but are not rooted and wither under trials. There will always be visible plants among the thorns/weeds that likewise grow and appear normal but in the end are choked out by the world (Mt 13:1ff). Jesus taught these parables as a warning to us. He describes typical responses to the word of God about which we are to be aware and alarmed lest our hearts become content with incomplete and inadequate responses to the gospel.

Warnings, not just reminders of the grace, are designed to awaken the hypocrite and the self-deceived, the complacent and the disobedient, lest they continue on the path of destruction. To say that those in conditions “3” to “5” (above) only need indicatives and not imperatives (in today’s parlance), only need to hear afresh what Christ has done and are not in need of exhortations as to what they must do, is to fly in the face of Jesus’ and the Apostles’ own pastoral method. I am ready to say that we are guilty of *pastoral malpractice*, no less, when we refuse to use the biblical warnings and threats to awaken them, and instead leave them in their wayward path. Let me say it again, it is pastorally irresponsible and a neglect of pastoral duty to fail to preach God’s gracious warnings. Faithful believers may at times find the warnings and threats of the New Testament unsettling. They may, at times, be prompted by doubts and fears to engage in self-examination, not an altogether negative result. Yet ordinarily the faithful will rejoice that the imperfectly converted are being rattled, knowing that such messages may be the means of their finding true life in Christ.

In many ways all we’re asking Presbyterian ministries to do is uphold the teaching of the Bible as our Confession of Faith and Catechisms understand that teaching, which they have sworn to uphold. Addressing the positive utility of the law for the Christian (the “third use”), the Confession identifies both its threats and promises. The law of God is “of use to the regenerate, to restrain their corruptions,” even “the threatenings of it show what . . . afflictions in this life,

they may expect for them, although freed from the curse thereof” (*WCF XIX.6*) Further, “The promises of (the law of God) . . . show that God’s approbation of obedience, and what blessings they may expect upon the performance thereof: although not as due to them by the law as a covenant of works” (*WCF XIX.6*). Do the “grace boys” believe this, that God threatens believers with afflictions for their disobedience and promises blessings upon their performance of the law? Do they believe that the threats of affliction and promises of blessing that are tied to the law of God ought to be preached, and further, that these principles are not “contrary to the grace of the gospel, but do sweetly comply with it” (*WCF XIX.7*)?

It's an old and familiar story. A young pastor is called to a large established, maybe even famous, but declining Presbyterian Church. Before long, he encounters opposition, which grows into a movement to remove him. He survives, the church recovers from a church split and goes on to thrive. A few years later he shares the lessons he's learned.

I can relate to the story. The parallels with my own experience are not exact, but are similar enough to be instructive and yet different enough to be disturbing. I also encountered a declining church. I knew changes needed to be made if trends were to be reversed. Yet the manner of doing so worked out quite differently than it has in recent years in the PCA, particularly as it has among those who perceive themselves to be champions of grace.

### **Change**

A seasoned PCA pastor cautioned me, "Don't change anything for five years." Don't go in as the guy with all the answers. Don't project to others that you know it all. Every program and procedure in the church has a name on it. Every change has the potential to offend the author of that program. By and large, I followed that counsel, particularly with respect to the public face of the ministry. The Sunday services remained pretty much what they had been for decades. All changes were subtle, noticeable only to the alert. Programs were added (e.g. officers' training, inquirers' class), staff was added, renovations were hurried along (e.g. the nursery). However, the public ministry, Sunday School, Sunday morning worship and Sunday evening worship remained comfortably and reassuringly familiar. I am convinced that this minimized the opposition when it began to swell and ensured that the focus of debate was the Gospel itself, not the novelties brought in by the inexperienced young minister.

However, these more recent pastors quickly have altered the public face of their churches, introducing more casual styles of worship service to very formal, traditional Presbyterian churches accustomed to robed choirs and pipe organs. The result has been the ecclesiastical equivalent of Apple meets IBM. Their predecessors had sometimes planted their churches, or pastored them for decades, and built them into congregations of several thousand members at their peak. Each church had its own culture. Unwittingly, the new pastors drove bulldozers over those cultures, destroying what was sacred, familiar, and comforting for many of its older members. One example has been dispensing with the clerical robe. It has been called a non-essential, which, of course, it is. However, identifying it as a non-essential is not the same as identifying it as unimportant. If it was customary, and if it was meaningful to a significant number of people, it was not unimportant. Their strong reaction to the un-robing of the pastor proves the point. If it was really non-essential, then why not leave it alone?

Of course, changes were made in the name of outreach. The evangelistic *ends* typically are used to justify the liturgical *means*. Innovation is necessary, it has been argued, in order to reach people, especially young people. That the changes were deeply alienating to what one pastor called "a small but vocal group of long-term (church) members" (read: older people) has not been allowed to alter the church's new direction. The group that separated in that case numbered over 400. They opposed, he says, "practically any and every change we initiated." Yet, that opposition met a determined change agent. "We had prayed and thought hard about what God

wanted this church to be, and we were very determined to get there.” “This is what we’re going to do and this is why we’re going to do it,” the congregation was told. Apparently considerable changes were implemented immediately upon arrival. The changes were perceived as being so revolutionary that within three months a petition drive was organized to have the new pastor removed. Undoubtedly many in the minority were unreasonable, and some were cruel. Still, one wonders: could the concerns of the opposition not have been validated? Could their interests not have been accommodated? This is not the first time that the new has encountered the old in the PCA. There is a pattern. A ministry that has been fruitful but has plateaued calls a young minister whom it hopes will inject energy and life into the church. He fails to understand the culture of the church. He imports a foreign, typically “hip & cool” culture which he is convinced is necessary if the church is to grow. In the process long-time members are pushed aside, their concerns invalidated, and they are warned of obstructing the gospel over selfish matters of personal taste. The hipsters win, the old folks head for the exits.

### **Lessons**

What these new pastors typically say they have learned is that they don’t need man’s approval because in Christ, they have God’s. Grace has freed them from trying to please others (which they see as a form of narcissistic bondage), and now they can relax in their security in Christ. This is said to be an important application of the doctrine of justification. Jesus frees us, as one pastor puts it, from “our addiction to being liked,” from “the enslaving pressure of measuring up to others,” from the “narcissistic impulse to impress people, appease people, measure up for people, or prove myself to people.” The finished work of Christ and the finality of the verdict of justification has become our “promised source of significance” and our “sense of worth and value.” They admit to “a fresh I-don’t-care-ness,” that “accompanies belief in the gospel.”

However, we might ask, does the gospel free us from the need to please others? There can be an idolatrous kind of man-pleasing which Jesus and the apostles denounce (e.g. Mt 6:1–18; Eph 6:5; Col 3:22). Yet there is also a proper kind of pleasing others which is called loving one’s neighbor, even loving one’s enemies. These new pastors endured difficult church splits. However, the lessons they learned seem *primarily to have been of psychological benefit to them*. Perhaps there are more important lessons that were missed. I’ve pastored a church that was painfully divided. Looking back I can now see that I should have shown more patience with those who resisted change. I should have shown more respect for the opinions of others. I should have put more effort into understanding and respecting the culture of the church (every church, not just those in the third world, has a culture). I should have validated my detractors’ concerns, to *some* degree, in *some* measure, instead of merely denouncing them.

It’s clear enough that in one case the new leadership of the church lost some perspective on the issues. The Presbytery eventually ruled that they had acted “impulsively and improperly” in banning six of the dissidents from the church’s property. Yes, the doctrine of justification frees me from the necessity of striving to win God’s favor through good works. Yes, it frees me from slavishly seeking man’s approval, since God’s approval is enough. However, it is an abuse of the doctrine to use it as an excuse to impose my opinions and preferences on others while ignoring theirs, all because “Jesus is everything.” The doctrine of *justification* is not a license for *self-justification*. Because Jesus is *everything*, we may not conclude that others are *nothing*. Because only God’s opinion counts doesn’t mean that I can ignore all other opinions about God’s opinion,

and use the doctrine of justification to justify my doing so. It may be that we are misreading the situation. However, the casual discarding of 400 members as a “small group,” and in that case, along with eight of the church’s original elders, does not suggest an overly sympathetic view of opposition voices.

Among the disturbing developments in the “grace only” movement is this appropriating of the doctrine of justification for sake of personal psychological well-being. It seems at times to have been hijacked to defend pastoral willfulness and closed-mindedness. Grace has become therapy for guilt-free ambition.

We’ll look next at an equally troubling second lesson that is claimed from these church splits, drawn from the doctrine of justification.

Last time we reviewed the sad story of a church split and what seemed to us to be an increasingly frequent misappropriation of the doctrine of justification. We saw a defense of “a fresh I-don’t-care-ness” about the opinions of those who oppose the renovation of a church’s ministry and alteration of its culture. We know of churches, great churches, some of which led the entire evangelical world in the work of evangelism and missions in the 70’s, 80’s, and 90’s, which are now accused of not having preached the gospel in decades! Self-justification is taken to this extent. Opponents of their innovations are said to be against the gospel and “what God wants the church to be.” They don’t just disagree. They don’t just have a different vision for the church. They aren’t just convinced that emphasis must be given elsewhere. *They oppose the gospel itself.* Opposition to the new pastors is tantamount to opposition to Christ Himself! This is how the battle lines are drawn. The champions of lopsided grace have shown little grace for the opposition, while simultaneously justifying their harshness in the name of grace. Meanwhile, their disciples are known to stir up trouble in existing churches with the serious accusation that “the gospel isn’t being preached in our church.” What strange developments we are witnessing these days. Because several of these pastors talk about their past struggles and current flourishing ministries, they invite comment, and we have been happy to give it.

### Passivity

The second lesson that often is claimed in these ministries is that of *contented passivity*. The doctrine of justification is used to justify (literally) a passive, and it seems to us unsound approach to Christian living. “Jesus is everything, I am nothing, therefore, *I do nothing*” seems to be the formula. Consider this: “When we stop narcissistically focusing on our need to get better, *that is what it means to get better.* When we stop obsessing over our need to improve, *that is what it means to improve.*” Can “let go, and let God” be far behind? Mortification and vivification, are central actions of sanctification, requiring efforts suitable to athletic and military metaphors (e.g. Rom 8:12ff; 1 Cor 9:24–27; Eph 4:17–6:20; Col 3:1–4; 6; 2 Tim 2:1–26; etc.). True, we shouldn’t be “narcissistically focusing” or “obsessing” over anything, ever. However, is it possible to “put off” and “put on” without *significant focus* on “our need to get better” and “our need to improve”? A lopsided vision of grace seems to go hand and hand with a laid-back view of the Christian life.

Justification has even been appropriated to defend mediocrity and failure. It used to be that Christian passivity was embraced in the services of the “victorious Christian life.” Keswick and other “higher-life” theologies insisted one need only yield to God and He would complete the work of sanctification. Bad as this was, the new passivity is worse. Now “let go and let God” has become “let go” and leave it at that. Passivity now serves Christian defeatism if not fatalism. Any mention of victorious living is scorned as hypocrisy. We’re all bad, and we shouldn’t pretend to be otherwise. Apparently none of us is getting any better, either. Claiming otherwise is said to be a denial of grace. To this we ask: have Christians not been born again (Jn 3:1ff)? Are they not indwelt by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19)? Have we not died with Christ and been raised up in newness of life, and promised that sin shall not be master over us (Rom 6:1–14)? Are we not new creations (2 Cor 5:17)? Can we not say, “and such *were* some of you” (1 Cor 6:11)? Sanctification in their hands all but disappears as a category for discussion.

These preachers speak as though Jesus saves us from the *penalty* of sin but leaves us in bondage to its *power*. Christian weakness and failure is not lamented, rather it is celebrated, misery, so it seems, loving company. Assurance is given that, “We are free to be weak . . . free to lose . . . free to be no one . . . free to be ordinary . . . free to fail,” because Jesus is the opposite of all of the above. This means freedom from the pressure to have a model marriage, model children, to be the one “logging on hours of private prayer each day,” and from the “heavy-duty pressure to be spiritual giants.” One preacher assures us he is freed “to identify my own idols in front of my people.” He admits,

“I’ll say things like, ‘I hate to admit this, but part of my motivation for preparing the sermon that I am preaching today is because I want you to think I’m a good preacher. It accentuates my sense of worth.’ Is that embarrassing to admit? Absolutely! But it’s incredibly liberating. I don’t have to feel like I have to always be on, that I always have to be performing well, that every sermon’s got to be a homerun, that I’ve got to be modeling perfect piety before all of our people. The pressure’s off.”

### **Christian victory**

However, is Jesus’ strength an excuse for our weakness or the basis of our strength? Is it the case that “when we are weak, then we are *weak*?” No, then we are *strong* (2 Cor 12:10). In Christ we are strong. Is Jesus’ victory an excuse for our defeat or the foundation of our victory? Are we not more than conquerors in Christ? Does He not give us the victory (Rom 8:37; 1 Cor 15:57)? Is Jesus’ success an excuse for our failure, or is it the ground of our success? Can we not do “all things through Him who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13)? Doesn’t grace motivate us to “*work* out our salvation” rather than *slouch* in our salvation (Eph 2:10)? Doesn’t the grace of Christ inspire and enable us, like it did to the Apostle Paul, to “*labor even more than all of them*” (1 Cor 15:10)?

Where do we find models of passivity among the early Christians? The Apostle Peter? The Apostle Paul? Do we encounter in them contentment respecting personal holiness and ministry? “I press on,” says the Apostle Paul (Phil 3:12-14). “I buffet my body and make it my slave,” he says, employing a boxing metaphor. Why does he push himself so? He answers in words that we can scarcely imagine the “grace boys” contemplating: “lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified” (1 Cor 9:27). The Apostles liken the Christian life to warfare, athletic completion, and farming (“the hard-working farmer”) (e.g. 1 Tim 2:3-6; 1 Cor 9:24-27; Eph 6:10-20). They reveal a consistent “divine discontent” with their progress in sanctification and ministry.

Frankly, I find “grace,” as some are describing it, to sound more like license: license for mediocrity, license for passivity, license for failure, license for sloth, and ironically, license for ambition. I especially don’t understand how anyone finds this view of grace to be comforting, much less what has been called a “functional lifeline.” Given the frequent use of the first person pronouns in these circles, it appears to be merely one form of narcissism (slavery to the opinions of others) replacing another (slavery to self). The doctrines of grace should not be turned into licentiousness (Jude 4; Gal 5:13). Neither should they be turned into psycho-babble.

The grace of God both brings salvation and instructs us “to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age” (Titus 2:11,12). *Grace*, not law, teaches us to deny worldly desires and live righteously. *Jesus* teaches us self-denial and cross-hearing (Mt 16:24,25). Moreover, pastors are to be “examples to the flock” (1 Pet 5:3). Timothy (1 Tim 4:12) and Titus (Titus 2:7) are urged to be examples of good deeds and good doctrines. The Apostle Paul reminded the Thessalonians of his ministry in these words:

*You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. (1 Thess 2:10)*

Ministers are to be models of family life and piety, worthy of imitation by their congregations. Do the expectations that arise from these passages put *pressure* on the pastor? I guess they do. Might he feel *stress* because of the expectations of members? Probably so. But God’s *grace* is sufficient. His power is perfected in weakness (2 Cor 12:9, 10).

One more thing. Pastors are to be “patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting the opposition” (2 Tim 2:24,25). Older men are to be appealed to as fathers, and older women as mothers (1Tim 5:1-2). Opponents are to be “put to shame” by the pastor’s “good deeds,” and by teaching that “show(s) integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned” (Titus 2:8). No gospel principle frees us to be less than faithful, devout, selfless “servants of all” (Mk 10:44).

## Chapter 7

## The Defense of Irony

*“You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us; and indeed, I wish that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you.”* (1 Cor 4:8)

*“For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this beautifully.”* (2 Cor 11:4)

The post-modern world recognizes no truth, only perspective, no morality, only preference. Consequently the ethos of the post-modern world (in which we are immersed) frowns upon truth claims, or assertions of right and wrong, all such being seen as arrogant. As for *criticism* of the beliefs and practices of others, that is seen as absolutely beyond the pale. It's bad enough that one might claim to have the truth when all right thinking people know that truth doesn't exist. But actually to criticize, correct, and heaven forbid, *mock* others' beliefs on the basis of one's truth claims? This is the height of naiveté and bad manners, and not to be done.

Yet Jesus said that He is the truth and that we can know God and know the truth (Jn 14:6, 17:3, 8:32). The biblical writers are sharply critical of the prophets of error, both within and outside the church, on the basis of their confidence in certain, infallible, and absolute truths. At times they even employ irony, ridiculing the opposition.

Take for instance Isaiah's scathing critique of idolatry. Idolaters take a block of wood. Part of it they use to build a fire and bake their bread, part of it they fashion into an idol and bow down and worship (Isa 44:9-20, cf. Isa 40:18-20, 41:6,7, 46:1,2). Isaiah draws out his description of the process to establish the absurdity of it, no doubt wounding the feelings of those who worshipped idols. The New Testament joins in this critique saying that the things that the Corinthians offer to their gods they offer to demons and not to God (1 Cor 10:20)! The Bible shows little respect for the sincerely held religious beliefs of pagans.

Jesus was severe when dealing with Pharisees, the most earnest professing believers of His day. He calls them hypocrites, blind guides, and a brood of vipers. He uses irony, likening them to “white washed tombs” and accuses them of straining out gnats while swallowing camels (Mt 23:13-28). These are vivid, ironic word pictures that heap scorn and derision on His critics. The Apostle Paul is no less severe in his denunciations of error wherever it may be found. He is especially harsh when dealing with Judaizers, who were adding Mosaic ceremonial requirements to salvation. He calls their contrary gospel “accursed” (Gal 1:9). He wishes that they might “mutilate,” probably meaning “castrate” themselves (“emasculate” in the ESV, Gal 5:12). He counts a legal righteousness or self-righteousness as “rubbish” (“dung” in the ESV, Phil 3:8).

Even among those who were preaching the truth he points out their corrupt motives: “Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife” (Phil 1:15). Some others “cause dissensions and hindrances” and are “slaves of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting” (Rom 16:17-18). The Apostles name names and sins. What about Diotrophes? He “loves to be preeminent” (3 Jn 9). Hymenaeus

and Alexander have rejected the faith and so have been delivered over to Satan (1 Tim 1:19). Demas deserted the cause “having loved this present world” (2 Tim 4:10). Whole churches are subjected to generalized criticisms by the Apostle John in Revelation 2 and 3.

Back to irony, which according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, means “the expression of meaning using language that normally expresses the opposite;” especially “the humorous or sarcastic use of praise to imply condemnation or contempt.” Irony is a literary device that is used to strengthen one’s argument or expose the weakness of the argument of another. The Apostle Paul says to the Corinthians, “you have become kings without us” (1 Cor 4:8). Again he says, “if anyone preaches another Jesus . . . you bear this beautifully” (2 Cor 11:4). His meaning in each case is the opposite, with a touch of sarcasm and a hint of mockery. Why would he use this form of speech? Because it exposes the absurdity of his opponents views as only irony can. Irony was elevated to high art at the time of the Reformation, all of the Reformers and their opponents employing it to ridicule, satirize, mock, and otherwise discredit their adversaries. The works of Mark Twain and Will Rogers are littered with irony, as were those of the wickedly effective columnist H.L. Mencken. Among today’s writers, Charles Krauthammer makes brilliant use of irony in his weekly column.

The church today is a slough of absurdity, faithlessness, and compromise. Post-modern sensibilities notwithstanding, there are times when harsh language, irony, sarcasm, and even ridicule are called for. Of course we must be careful about this. We are all our own bundle of contradictions and corruptions. There are too many bloggers and self-appointed prophets blasting every passerby in the name of Truth. Nevertheless, the example of the biblical writers tells us that we have the obligation to use every literary and rhetorical weapon in our arsenal to preserve the health of the gospel and the church. For us to refuse to ridicule the ridiculous is to be guilty of false modesty, and probably faithlessness. We need to ask of our reticence to criticize, to name names, or even to mock, whether our sensibilities are those of the Bible, or those of the post-modern spirit of the age.

Two years after the “Grace Boys” was published in our *Messenger*, we have the opportunity to review subsequent events and establish where we now stand. The original article immediately was posted at a popular blog site. The reaction, inside and outside of the church, was swift. Strong appreciation arrived by e-mail from leading ministers within the PCA. Others were not so pleased. The theme was simple. Too many ministries were preaching a truncated gospel: justification without sanctification, faith without works, privilege without duty, grace without law, holiness without effort. The Christian life was being reduced to a formula while the multiple motivations for obedience and service to which Jesus and the apostles appeal were being ignored; not just ignored, but denigrated.

Two years later several reflections are worth noting.

### **Unloving gracers**

First, it is always fascinating to observe that those who accuse us of not loving enough do so in the most unloving of ways. Similarly, those who say we need more grace so often do so gracelessly. The irony is, of course, rich. Some communications lectured me about how they believed in eternal security and nothing I said was going to rob them of their assurance—as though I hadn’t preached, written whole books and multiple pamphlets on the subject over a 25-year period: like *The Case for Traditional Protestantism* (on faith, grace, and Christ alone), *When Grace Comes Home* (with chapters on assurance, law, and sanctification), *When Grace Transforms* (on how and into what the gospel changes us), *When Grace Comes Alive* (on our dependence upon prayer, that is, on God), the *Five Points of Calvinism* (with the vital “P” for Perseverance and eternal security), and since then *Galatians: A Mentor Expository Commentary*, etc. Can anyone say, “the benefit of the doubt”? These were head-scratchers. Presumptuous head-scratchers.

Some used the occasion to offer *ad hominem* (*ad ecclesasticum*?) criticism of our church. IPC is all law and no love, they alleged. My bottom line is this: Independent Presbyterian Church is essentially a good church, filled with wonderful, caring people (none better, as I see it), blessed with outstanding lay-leadership (as on your session and diaconate and among our women and youth), and led by faithful ministers. We have many weaknesses. There are a number of things that we should do better. Yet fundamentally IPC is a solid church for which its members, and even other believers who are not members, should be grateful. One might have hoped for more charitable, more *gracious* judgments by those who purport to be champions of grace.

### **No comment**

Second, I spent the next six months of newsletters laying out the biblical balance of law and gospel, devoting issues to assurance and all the pertinent issues (articles 2-7 in this edition). Since then I have written a related series of six months on “Christian Identity” (now a pamphlet, “The Identity of the Christian,” and available online). The result? Ne’er a comment from the critics. Not one. I might have expected the odd, “Thank you for clarifying your views.” Or, “Now I see what you’re saying.” Nope. No interaction. Nothing. Given that some heavy-duty pejoratives were hurled in my direction, like “not enough grace” and “legalist” and “doesn’t believe in assurance,” this was disappointing. I suppose the excuse was that I had hurled my own

weighty pejoratives in *their* direction, including the diminutive “Grace Boys” label. The difference is, I never named names. Mine was a, “if the shoe fits wear it” approach, where if a person were not guilty of the errors I identified, he need not take it personally. Apparently, given the squeals, I hit the target. I wrote, admittedly, with irony. Given apostolic precedent, irony, even sarcasm, is perfectly legitimate when issuing a wake-up call (e.g. 1 Cor 4:8; 2 Cor 11:4, etc.). I meant no harm to the innocent. I *am* alarmed by the prophets of hyper-grace. I continue to urge them to factor into their formulations of grace the whole biblical revelation.

### **Allies**

Shortly after “Grace Boys” went viral, I learned of an organized movement to combat the hyper-grace distortions and the ethical laxity that inevitably accompanies them. Among the leaders and participants were Rick Phillips of Second Greenville, Ligon Duncan of First Jackson, Carl Robbins of Woodruff Road, Randy Pope of Perimeter, Harry Reeder of Briarwood, Liam Gallagher of Tenth, Philadelphia, Mike Ross of Christ Covenant, Charlotte, and Jim Barnes of Christ Covenant in Knoxville. Among other concerned parties are fathers of the denomination: Charles Dunahoo, who for 20 years was the coordinator of Christian Education & Publication; Joey Pipa, President of Greenville Presbyterian Seminary; and former moderators of the General Assembly, James Baird and Frank Barker. I could name many more. We’ve struggled to determine what to call ourselves and others. Some didn’t like conceding the word “grace,” as in “grace boys,” “hyper-grace,” and “contemporary grace movement.” This is still unresolved.

Who are we? “The *True* Grace Boys?” “The Holiness Movement?” Heaven forbid, history has had enough of those. “The Sanctification Movement?” Doesn’t have much of a ring to it. The problem is just like hyper-Calvinism isn’t Calvinism, hyper-grace of the sort ascribed by Galatians 5:13ff and Jude 4, isn’t grace at all. It is license, a distortion of the gospel about which the Apostle Paul regularly exclaims, “May it never be!” (Rom 3:8,31; 6:1,2,15).

### **Retractions**

The one sentence that seemed to spark the most adverse reactions was this: “Threatening believers with exclusion from heaven is a powerful incentive to obedience, is it not?,” which I claimed after citing 1 Peter 1:17, Hebrews 10:31, Galatians 5:19-24, and 1 Corinthians 5:9-10. At the time I asked those who objected to my wording if I added the word “professing” to the word “believers,” would it make any difference? They all said yes. So I changed the permanent internet post to “professing believers,” as I also did in the “Grace Debates” pamphlet.

I would add this, though. Jesus and the apostles never use the word “professing” when issuing the above warnings in order to qualify and limit their application. Theologically we are right to do so, because of biblical doctrine of eternal security (see Jn 10:27-30; Rom 8:28-39). However, we note that Jesus and the apostles, as shepherds of their flocks, never provide that qualification. One need look no further than the “Parable of the Sower” (Mk 4:1-20). Jesus and the apostles address the whole visible church and let the Holy Spirit do the encouraging and discouraging. I’m not sure that the biblical writers would avoid the censure of the hyper-grace movement for their alleged pastoral oversight.

Another allegation was that in subsequent articles I misused the warnings of Hebrews 6, that those who have “fallen away” may never be “renewed to repentance” (Heb 6:6). This was

thought to be illegitimate scare tactics since the writer goes on to say, “But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you . . .” (Heb 6:9). My question is, if he is “convinced of better things,” then why the warning? Thank you for proving my point. It seems to me that this passage establishes beyond debate the value of warnings and their effectiveness in preventing apostasy. His target is those tempted to “fall away,” but he addresses the whole church. He’s *convinced* of “better things” and yet *still he warns* in the strongest terms.

### **Conclusion**

Two-year’s perspective strengthens my sense that “The Grace Boys” needed to be written. We have serious, serious problems with moral complacency in our ecclesiastical circles. We also have problems with divisive persons who would accuse preachers and churches of not preaching the gospel when they hear apostolic warnings preached in the same manner as the apostle delivered them, or when they hear moral exhortations, or even when they hear close applications. Those whose every answer to worldliness is “preach the gospel again” or “think more about your justification,” are preaching “one size fits all” answers to complex spiritual problems. People are diverse. Different people at different times need encouragement or rebuke, reassurance or warning. Any attempts to eclipse the fullness of the biblical revelation must be resisted if we are to grow believers into the fullness of Christian maturity. Only through exposure to the whole counsel of God will grace boys become grace men.