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Is Grace well and alive among us?

No, I am not writing about a lady blessed with such a name, but about the most Gracious Lady ever: *the doctrine that salvation and life come to us by no other way than by grace alone. And by no other merit than the merit of Jesus Christ.* Is *that* really alive among us? I hope it is, but sometimes I wonder. I think it's often threatened, not only in the academic world but also in the pulpit.

Let me talk first a bit about that academic world. For the last 40 years, the doctrines of grace were thought to be threatened by a movement within scholarly circles called the New Perspective on Paul. The idea was that for centuries we have been reading Paul's writings quite wrongly. We had read him entirely through the lens of the Reformation, imagining that Paul's struggles were the same as Luther's, and that the Pharisees in the New Testament period were exactly the same as the Roman Catholics of the Reformation period. Luther and Calvin often equated their contemporary opponents with the opponents of Jesus and Paul, and the church has made the same mistake since, said men like E. P. Sanders, N. T. Wright, and James Dunn. Instead, when we read the Gospels and Paul's letters on their own terms, they maintained, we see that they are not about people trying to earn salvation by works; rather the point of controversy is about certain works which were considered significant because they were thought necessary in order to be Jewish. When you translate that to Christianity, the question became *not* "are there certain works you need to do to be saved?", *but* "are there certain (Jewish) works you need to do to become part of Christianity? The dispute, they said, was all about whether Gentiles who became Christians had to do things like circumcision, fasting, and sabbath observance. Against his opponents, they say, Paul is saying: "no, faith is the only thing that matters."

All of this has produced a mountain of scholarly discussions in the form of books and articles, creating a resurgence of interest in New Testament studies. Why? Because it was thought that the first-century issue was not about the relation between grace and works after all. The Jewish people had that matter figured out quite well, they said. Paul was not just all about salvation by grace through faith. The Reformed confessions seemed to need major revision. And so, no lack of volumes rolled out. Least among all these studies, was also my 2008 dissertation*, in which I reviewed a key passage of Paul, namely, Romans 4. You see, my doctoral supervisor, Dr. Stephen Westerholm of McMaster University, had maintained that this was the passage which proved the New Perspective writers wrong. So, in this book, I reviewed the works of scholars who were in favour of the new approach to Paul and scholars who were against, and then offered my own analysis of the debate and the passage of Scripture. But in this article now, I don't want to talk about that book. I just want to assure you that, in my judgement, the battle is over and Grace is alive and well in the scholarly world. The Reformed confessions *are* on the mark.

How so? Well, we are now in a period being called "*Beyond the New Perspective*" and scholars are suggesting that there are elements that are true in both the traditional approach and the New Perspective. Perhaps scholars in earlier days did not pay enough attention to issues of race, and how the doctrine of justification by faith through grace was formulated especially in the context of Paul's work among the Gentiles. And to suggest that every person in the New Testament is busy with the question "how do I get to heaven?"

might be an exaggeration. But, on the other hand, to suggest that the issue in the New Testament is *only* about race and not about grace is quite wrong, a growing number of scholars are now rightly saying. It has been shown that the Judaism of the New Testament was not unlike the semi-pelagianism that preceded the Reformation; so the issues were very similar. John M. G. Barclay, in a delightful, weighty book called *Paul and the Gift*¹ rightly concludes that both the traditional approach and the New Perspective were on to something. The issue in Romans is not just the sinfulness of all humanity and the possible pretension that one might have some degree of meritorious works to boast about (Romans 3), but also a possible arrogance based on ethnic difference (Romans 2). The judgement of God will “take no account of the ethnic differences between Jew or Greek (2:6-11, p.467). Paul’s point then truly is that works don’t merit anything before God. Earning salvation is a dead end, but being Jewish or having covenant status does not merit either. Race is irrelevant. *All that really matters is the free grace of a God who has given the gift of grace in Christ.* The Giver regards neither ethical nor ethnic privilege when he graciously bestows life in Christ. New life “is experienced by human beings only inasmuch as they share in, and draw from, a life whose source lies outside of themselves, the life of the risen Christ” (501).

What does it mean? It means that in the scholarly world, Grace is alive and well. It means that in the ecclesiastical world, preachers can and should pull out all the stops when it comes to preaching Grace. Not that Reformed preachers haven’t, but I think sometimes its not just academics that might make them reserved, but it might be the folks in the pew or perhaps in the elders’ bench.

For example, we often say that what we need is a balance between law and grace, and preaching that has that balance. But the gospel is not 50% law and 50% grace. And preaching does not need to strike this balance. That approach betrays the fact that we have not sufficiently abandoned the legalism whereby we attempt to make ourselves right with God by what we do or do not do. Rather than being a balance between grace and law, we need to see that “it is the good news of grace that results in grateful lives of godliness”² Paul says in Romans 3:20 “no one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands”(NLT), and then begins to talk about justification by faith through grace alone (Romans 4, 5, 6). He hits the nail on the head when he points out (very contrary to his opponents) that “you are not under law, but under grace”(6:14). If there is a context in which the law functions productively for the people of God, it may be in terms of exposing sin (Romans 7:7) and in terms of living out the life of grace (Romans 13:8f.), but it has no role to play in terms of our deliverance. Likewise, in the second part of the catechism, the only place the law comes up in any way is when it describes the obedience of Christ (LD 23) – we are saved through His obedience to the law, not ours. Likewise, the catechism is not attempting to put us back under law when it discusses the ten commandments in LD 34-44; rather, it’s trying to show us how the Christ who has redeemed us (LD 6-31) “also renews us by his Holy Spirit to be his image...”(LD 32). Just as God sought to keep the people whom He had freed from slavery (Ex.20:2) away from sin by giving them the ten words of the covenant, so He does with respect to those who have been freed in Christ. The law is useful

¹ My review of *Paul and the Gift* (Eerdmans, 2015) will appear in a future edition of *Unio cum Christo: International Journal of Reformed Theology and Life*.

² Bryan Chappell, *Unlimited Grace: the Heart Chemistry that Frees from Sin and Fuels the Christian Life* (Crossway, 2016) loc. 1699.

as a gauge of the Christian life, but only the grace of God in Christ can give us and keep us in that Christian life.

Perhaps what we keep tripping over is the fact that in our circles we often speak about conditions of the covenant, and we do talk about promises *and demands* of the covenant. Here too Barclay can be helpful. Whereas the modern idea is that in order for something to be free and of grace, it has to be without any expectation of any kind of payback in return, Barclay points out that this is not how Paul or any of the ancients understood *grace*. In a patron-client society, there was always the expectation of some kind of return to the giver. So too the apostle. The God who freely gives His grace does expect a return on His most gracious gift. It is intended to lead to “the obedience of faith,” which refers also the faithful service that flows out of faith. The clearest expression of that is perhaps in Titus 2:11-13: “the grace of God . . . teaches us to say ‘no’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in the present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearance of our great God and Savior . . . “. As Barclay puts it in a compact sentence, Paul “simultaneously emphasizes the incongruity of grace and the expectation that those who are ‘under grace’ (and wholly refashioned by it) will be reoriented in the ‘obedience of faith’” (562). So we can refer to that as “conditions of the covenant” if we like, but we must never understand those to be conditions that grant us entrance or earn us merit. It is thoroughly and always a covenant of *grace*.

In truth, we owe *everything* to that lovely lady named Grace. The basis for our redeemed status is not even minutely due to merit, or race, or covenant status, or church membership, or anything else in all creation other than Grace – the grace of God in Christ. It’s not works. It’s not race. It’s Grace. Even as God continues to work in us and through us, it’s His grace that is operative in us.

So preachers really need to be wedded to Grace; every comfort, every admonition has to be placed in the context of the grace of God that comes to the undeserving of every race. As Hebrews put it, strikingly, in 12:15 (NIV84) “*see to it that no one misses the grace of God. . .*” Preach it, brothers!