

Reformation
& Revival



A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership

Volume 3, Number 1 • Winter 1994

Reformation & Revival Journal

A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership

Published by
Reformation & Revival Ministries, Inc.
P.O. Box 88216
Carol Stream, Illinois 60188-1917
(708) 653-4165

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Reformation & Revival Journal (ISSN 1071-7277) is published quarterly, for \$20 per year, or \$35 for two years, by Reformation & Revival Ministries, Inc., 152 Yuma Lane, Carol Stream, Illinois, 60188-1917. Application to mail at second-class rates is pending at Carol Stream, Illinois and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Reformation & Revival Journal*, P.O. Box 88216, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188-1917.

Reformation & Revival Journal is published four times each year by Reformation & Revival Ministries, Inc., a not-for-profit teaching ministry organized in the state of Illinois in 1991. The ministry is committed to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the infallible Word of God and is in essential agreement with the confessional statements of historic Reformation theology. The purpose of this ministry is centered in its name:

1. To encourage *reformation* in the local Christian churches worldwide,
 2. To promote the cause of *revival* and spiritual awakening through prayer and the provision of resources to aid Christian leaders.
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Information

Subscription rates are \$20 for one year, \$35 for two years. Please remit in U.S. currency only. For overseas orders add \$4 for each year for postage. Back issues and single issues are \$6 each. Canadian subscribers add \$2 per year for additional postage.

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The conviction of the staff and editors of the *Reformation & Revival Journal* is that awakening, of the kind seen in the First Great Awakening in this country, wedded to the doctrinal concerns of the historic Protestant Reformation as expressed in the terms *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, and *sola fide*, is needed in our generation.

ISSN 1071-7277

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Editor's Introduction

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

Some of the most familiar words in all the language. Too familiar? Perhaps. But what is grace? And how does it affect the life of the church and that of our pastors to affirm and believe in the grace of God? And we use a host of adjectives to explain the various shades of meaning assigned to grace. We speak of efficacious grace, free grace, irresistible grace, and prevenient grace. We refer to grace with words like sanctifying, special and sufficient. And we come across ideas like the covenant of grace and common grace in historical theology. And since the days of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the martyred German pastor-theologian of the Nazi era, we have a new adjective, which has given us a new usage of our word, “cheap grace.”

Grace has been variously defined. Contemporary theologian Millard J. Erickson, in his helpful little book, *A Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology*, writes that grace is “God’s dealing with man in undeserved ways; it is simply an outflow of God’s goodness and generosity.”

Grace is a kind of key that unlocks the whole of God’s revelation to us in Scripture. It has been said that the theme of the Bible is salvation, and various theologies have stressed this in several ways. But if this is true then it would be perhaps more accurate to say that the salvation which the Bible presents is a display of grace from first to last. Biblical salvation is all of grace (Eph. 2:5, 8); grace brings it to sinful mankind (Titus 2:11); and the end of all that God does in salvation is doxological, with the focus of our praise for all eternity upon His glorious grace (Eph. 1:6). J. I. Packer observes, therefore, that “. . . this one word ‘grace’ contains within itself the whole of New Testament theology. The New

Testament message is just the announcement that grace has come to men in and through Jesus Christ, plus a summons from God to receive this grace (Rom. 5:17; 2 Cor. 6:1) Grace is the sum and substance of New Testament faith."¹

We can not make sense of the Bible, especially the New Testament, unless we begin with grace. Multitudes (even within what we call *evangelicalism*) have missed this grand theme, and as a result they find moralistic life principles in the New Testament, and not life itself! They especially trip over the Pauline Epistles, not seeing the glorious truth of grace running like a beautiful thread throughout. Others bring mystical notions to the New Testament that keep them from this theme as well. As many theologians have noted, the New Testament has God the Holy Spirit as its author, with grace its theme. It is the theme which holds the various historical and theological truths together.

The grace of God is at the heart of any distinctly Christian theology. Indeed, one might say this theme separates Christian theologies from all others with their various emphases upon man's life of religious devotion and moralistic effort, and his futile attempts to appease an angry Deity, etc. Perhaps it is because this theme of grace runs like a thread through the whole of Christian theology and worship that we do not often seek to define or understand it better than we do. It is a presupposition of all that Christians believe, and it is present in every doctrine that we confess, yet it is infrequently defined or carefully pondered by the devout Christian in our time.

As important as this theme is, we can safely observe that it has been lost on many in our time. If we are to see a recovery of biblical truth and a genuine awakening in our churches then we must have a recovery of this theme of the Scriptures, for as J. I. Packer notes:

Unhappily, however, the meaning of grace is not well appreciated today. For the past century and more, this topic has been so neglected by some, and mishandled by others, that the clear and profound understanding of it which the Reformers and Puritans and eighteenth-century Evangelicals bequeathed to their posterity has almost vanished from the British [and North American] religious scene. The word "grace" remains as part of our religious vocabulary, and we regularly hear it used in public prayer ("grant us the help of Thy grace . . ." "give us grace that we may . . ."). But to many it suggests only vague notions of a celestial battery-charge administered through the sacraments, while to more (one fears) it signifies nothing whatsoever. And meantime many practice in the name of Christianity forms of religion which frustrate and deny the grace of God completely. . . . No need in Christendom is more urgent than the need for a renewed awareness of what the grace of God really is. Christians long to see reformation and revival in the churches; today as yesterday, it is only from a rediscovery of grace that these blessings will flow.²

Reformed theology, in particular, has always had a preoccupation with grace. Perhaps the reason for this is found in the sixteenth-century debates with Rome over soteriology, but one senses that it is fundamentally related to the reforming impulse itself, an impulse always desirous of reclaiming grace in its distinctly biblical, and particularly Pauline, sense. It was in the Pauline letters to the Romans and the Galatians that Luther, an Augustinian monk, discovered the true meaning of freedom and forgiveness for his frequently tormented soul. Here he found the answer to God's law and its demands for righteousness. Here he discovered that God declares as just those who believe, solely on the basis of grace received through faith alone. The righteousness of Christ is given by imputation to the believing sinner. The whole transaction is one of pure grace, understood as God's free, gratuitous and salvific activity for those dead in transgressions and sin. John Calvin, following

this pattern of thought and developing further this "grace-centered" perspective, saw grace as "the main hinge on which religion turns." In this, Calvin, as Luther, rediscovered the Augustinian teaching on sin as a condition and state into which all men are born in Adam. Sin was not merely "bad choices" or actions, but a state of being. Men sin for sure, but they sin precisely because they are sinful God haters, bound to their own evil inclinations and desires. Augustine, a theologian of grace if there ever was such, saw the only hope for man the sinner was God's grace. Luther and Calvin reclaimed this central truth in their day, and light burst forth with renewed effect upon the church of Christ.³

John Calvin sought to develop a radically Pauline doctrine of the Christian life, and did so by emphasis upon grace from start to finish. He wrote:

Christ was given to us by God's generosity [i.e., grace], to be grasped and possessed by us in faith. By partaking of him, we principally receive a *double grace*: namely, that being reconciled to God through Christ's blamelessness, we may have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father; and secondly, that sanctified by Christ's spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life.⁴

All that we are as believers is lived out by grace and through our response to God's grace, His free and unmerited favor toward us in Jesus Christ. Both justification and sanctification have their roots in grace. And the grace which saves us leads us to offer our whole life as an act of worship to God (Rom. 12:1-2).

Hymn writer and preacher Philip Doddridge expressed this well when in 1755 he composed the words of a hymn which says:

Grace! 'tis a charming sound, harmonious to my ear;

heav'n with the echo shall resound, and all the earth shall hear.

Grace first contrived a way to save rebellious man,
and all the steps that grace display which drew the wondrous plan.

Grace taught my wand'ring feet to tread the heav'nly road,
and new supplies each hour I meet while pressing on to God.

Grace all the work shall crown through everlasting days;
it lays in heav'n the topmost stone, and well deserves the praise.⁵

Editor

End Notes

- 1 J. I. Packer, *God's Words* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press 1981), 95.
- 2 Ibid., 95-96.
- 3 Donald K. McKim (Editor), *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 160-61.
- 4 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 3, Chapter 11, Section 1. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975 edition), 725.
- 5 Philip Doddridge, a hymn titled: "Grace! 'Tis a Charming Sound." Doddridge (1702-1751) was an English nonconformist minister who most notably served as principal of an academy and pastor of a large church in Northampton. He wrote several books but is best known for his hymns, many of which are still sung today.