

Grace & Gratitude

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Grace and Gratitude

Scripture

1 Peter 3:15 In the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, the blessing of God's grace is now bestowed on believers, confirming the hope in which we live.

Romans 1:16–17; 3:22b–28 Paul invites all to accept grace through faith and to acknowledge the gift of righteousness.

Luke 17:11–19 While ten men with a skin disease were healed, only one returns to give thanks to Jesus.

Prayer

Blessed God, we are filled with awe when we consider the grace you offer to each of us and to our community. We give thanks for our Lord Jesus, who understands our joys and our pains. Let your Spirit be near so that we may learn and understand and again be surprised by your grace. Amen.

Introduction

“Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.” (1 Peter 3:15). This admonishment appears in the context of a discussion of how believers in Christ are to conduct themselves when those outside the Christian community criticize them for their way of life and beliefs. Peter encourages his readers by telling them that Christ died for all unrighteous people, including those inside and outside the church, in order to bring us into the presence of God. If Christ's work is for all, then our lives and words will proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to all persons. The affirmation is shared among all Christians.

Even though all Christians are to proclaim the gospel, each Christian tradition brings certain strengths or gifts to the conversation. Think of congregations in your community and the particular strengths each brings to the Christian community at large in their proclamation of the gospel. What do you admire about the different traditions? Perhaps you admire the reverence for the

sacraments you see in the Roman Catholics, the exuberance of the Pentecostals as they revel in the Holy Spirit, or the way National Baptists live out their faith together in the political sphere. Followers of each tradition live out the gospel message in a particular way.

What is the Presbyterian way to live out and to proclaim the gospel?

If we don't have a gospel answer to who we are as Presbyterians, then we should all close shop. Think of your congregation. How do you describe it to people who don't belong? When someone asks you why your congregation is called Presbyterian, what do you answer?

The Need for a Coherent Reformed-Theological Identity

Recently a pastor of a strong and healthy church told me that his congregation would be planting a new congregation. In the discernment process leading to the decision, he asked the congregation three questions:

- Why plant a church?
- Why should this particular congregation plant a church?
- Why plant a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregation?

Answers came quickly in response to the first two questions. Answers to the third question were slower in coming and, frankly, less compelling. We Presbyterians have a hard time articulating our theological and spiritual visions in compelling ways. Our inability to articulate our identity is rooted in our history. You can ask any group of pastors and elders, "Why are we called Presbyterians?" and someone will most likely answer, "Because we're ruled by elders." In one sense that's the right answer, and it affirms the parity or equality of teaching and ruling elders, which is important to us.

Nonetheless, it doesn't answer the question. Many church traditions have elders in their leadership but don't call themselves Presbyterians. Many churches have presbyteries or something very much like them, but they don't call themselves Presbyterian. Most Reformed churches around the world don't call themselves Presbyterian. We are called Presbyterians because at one point in our history the most significant

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ecclesial dispute was how the church was to be governed. The late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in England and Scotland were a time of revolution against the monarchy and vigorous, new debates about how people should be governed. This discussion on governance spanned both state and church. In political matters, some were monarchists, some favored governance through elected representatives, while others wanted a pure democracy. In a parallel discussion in the church, some people believed in government by a bishop; others, in government by elders; and still others, in government by the people of the congregations. Hence, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists were born. Reformed Christians are known as Presbyterians only in England and Scotland and among their descendants around the world.

In this formative period of our tradition, church government was the most important question. The legacy of our origin means that to characterize our identity, we often lead with matters of polity. As a result, sometimes it feels as if our motto, brand, or tagline is something like “Presbyterians—we’re the people who brought you presbyteries.” Now, this may be a true statement and even a good thing, but it is hardly a vision that will fuel decades of ministry.

Finding Our Identity in God’s Grace

What will inspire a shared ministry? What issues from the core of our identity that compels us to practice Christian community, proclaim the gospel, and work for justice? Grace and gratitude.

Grace and gratitude succinctly and winsomely describe the charism or the gift of the Reformed tradition. Each tradition has a gift to offer to the ecumenical church. We Reformed Presbyterians admire the Mennonites’ discipline of not conforming to the surrounding culture, appreciate God’s presence in the Roman Catholic sacraments, honor the National Baptists’ commitment to engage the structures of society, and admire the spiritual exuberance of Pentecostals. Grace and gratitude are our gift to the wider church.

This description came alive for me when reading Brian Gerrish’s book *Grace and Gratitude*.¹ Gerrish explores John Calvin’s (1509–1564) theology of the Lord’s Supper. At the table, the relation of God and humanity is exhibited. God calls us to the table and feeds us on Christ himself, and we are sent forth in gratitude for God’s gracious

1. Brian A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

movement toward us. The relationship broken by sin is restored by God’s initiative—we offer our thanks with our whole lives. More than a characterization of Calvin’s theology of the Lord’s Supper, grace and gratitude capture Calvin’s entire theological vision.

We use the term *grace* in many ways in normal conversation. For example, we speak of social grace, and we engage in polite conversation about the gracious movements of figure skaters or professional dancers.² We can fool our bosses into thinking we can demonstrate grace under fire when all the time we are about to explode. When designing a piece, woodworkers often look for a graceful line. Our ordinary uses of the word *grace* derive from a far more profound notion of God’s grace: the unmerited favor of God, unconditional grace, the kind of grace God freely offers.

For Presbyterians and other Reformed Christians, Paul’s letters provide substantial grounding in the grace of God. Romans 1:16–17 functions as the thesis statement of the epistle to the church in Rome:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.”

Paul describes the gospel as the ultimate expression of God’s commitment and power to reclaim—to reconcile—the world. The power of God achieves salvation and extends it to Jew and Gentile alike. God’s righteousness finds expression through God’s faithfulness toward human beings to accomplish salvation and bring about justice. God’s faithfulness in turn empowers human beings to express faith in Christ. *Salvation, redemption, atonement*—whatever word we use to describe God’s benevolent action toward humanity, it is sheer gift. Really! No strings. It is all grace!

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2. For a particularly appropriate example, check out the YouTube video of Ronald K. Brown’s landmark work *Grace*. Created for the Ailey company in 1999, it is a rapturous, spiritually charged work set to Duke Ellington’s classic “Come Sunday,” Roy Davis’s hit “Gabriel,” and the powerful rhythms of Fela Kuti’s Afro-Pop.

Thus we begin to see the outline of a Presbyterian picture of God. God is the gracious one who comes to us in creation, in the law, in the words of the prophets, and ultimately in the person of Jesus Christ. God sustains us with the ongoing grace of the Holy Spirit. God calls us through the church. God is for us.

The French baptismal liturgy developed by the Huguenot church during the sixteenth-century Reformation period provides a profound articulation of a theological and spiritual picture of our gracious God:

Little one, for you Jesus Christ came into the world:
for you he lived and showed God's love;
for you he suffered the darkness of Calvary
and cried at the last, "It is accomplished";
for you he triumphed over death and rose in newness of life;
for you he ascended to reign at God's right hand.
All this he did for you, little one,
though you do not know it yet.
And so the word of Scripture is fulfilled:
"We love because God loved us first."³

This is grace.

Finding Our Identity in Gratitude

A story from Luke's Gospel illuminates how we might respond to God's grace:

On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten men with skin diseases approached him. Keeping their distance from him, they raised their voices and said, "Jesus, Master, show us mercy!"

When Jesus saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." As they left, they were cleansed. One of them, when he saw that he had been healed, returned and praised God with a loud voice. He fell on his face at Jesus' feet and thanked him. He was a Samaritan. Jesus replied, "Weren't ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? No one returned to praise

3. Church of Scotland, *Book of Common Order* (Edinburgh: St. Andrews Press, 1994, 1996), pp. 89–90.

God except this foreigner?” Then Jesus said to him, “Get up and go. Your faith has healed you.” (Luke 17:11–19, CEB)

Gratitude is our only appropriate response to the grace of God. Gratitude for our lives, for our families, for our material possessions, for our community. Gratitude that compels us to share the love of Christ in the community and do justice and love mercy for all God’s children. The theologian Karl Barth wrote that grace and gratitude “belong together like heaven and earth. Grace evokes gratitude like the voice an echo. Gratitude follows grace like thunder [follows] lightning.”⁴ If God is, in essence, grace, then we are, in essence, gratitude.

You can hear gratitude in the last clause of the answer to question 86 of the Heidelberg Catechism:

Q. Since we are redeemed from our sin and its wretched consequences by grace through Christ without any merit of our own, why must we do good works?

A. Because just as Christ has redeemed us with his blood he also renews us through his Holy Spirit according to his own image, so that with our whole life we may show ourselves grateful to God for his goodness

Have you ever been in a store or at a tourist destination and had someone offer you a “free gift”? I’m always suspicious of free gifts because they are rarely free. Eventually, we will pay in some way. Our distrustful reaction transfers easily from timeshare offers to the free offer of grace from God. We keep waiting for the other shoe to drop. “What do I have to do?” we wonder.

One of the perennial questions from our tradition is “If God’s grace is unconditional, if it is really unmerited favor, then why do I have to live as a Christian?” Using the language of the Heidelberg Catechism, the question becomes “Why do I have to do good works?” The short answer to this profound question is “You don’t.” This can be a very unsettling answer. While we are suspicious that free gifts aren’t really free, we also feel beholden when the gift is truly free. We want to find a way to repay and to even the scales. However, there is no possibility of evening the scales with God. What do we have to do? Nothing, nada, zilch.

4. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley, rpt. (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1960), IV/1, p. 41.

Isn't discipleship all about following Jesus? Yes. The invitation in the Gospels—"Follow me" (Mark 1:17)—is the invitation to all of us. We follow, however, not to pay God back or earn our way. We follow out of a deep and abiding sense of gratitude for God's gift to us in Jesus Christ. We are not obliged to follow; we are free to follow. We are never freer than when we are following Jesus.

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What does grace-filled living look like? When we are invited to pass the peace in worship, we often hear words such as "As those who have received peace, let us pass peace to one another." Grace is like that: As those who have received grace, let us turn the other cheek and extend grace to others.

Spiritual Practice

This week, particularly in your life around your congregation, meditate on your identity as founded in grace. Consider daily the gift of grace in Jesus Christ, and look for ways that grace-filled identity might shape every aspect of your life.

Questions for Reflection

How do you see the relationship of grace and gratitude in the worship of your congregation? In the Scriptures? In your life as a Christian?

In what concrete ways can you embrace the message that you don't have to do anything in response to God's grace? How can gratitude be a powerful force in your life?

How do you respond to the charge that an emphasis on grace can be "cheap" and lead to low expectations for the life of the Christian?