

Grace: How Strange the Sound

Michael S. Horton

As recounted in the recent film, the author of "Amazing Grace," John Newton, not only knew about grace, but every line of the famous hymn was part of his experience. Born in 1725 to a Protestant mother and a mariner father who had been educated by Spanish Jesuits, John Newton was taught by his mother to read and to memorize the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* by the age of four. With his mother's death and a distant and stern father, Newton became rudderless and eventually captained his own slave ship. After reading Thomas Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*, he committed his life to Christ, but had no trouble continuing his involvement in the slave trade. Newton recalls, "I was not truly a believer in Christ" during that period. Continuing to read, especially the Bible, he taught himself Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Syriac, and was profoundly affected by George Whitefield, through whose preaching he came to understand the gospel clearly. Through the aid of Lord Dartmouth, he was ordained in the Church of England and served parishes in Olney and London. As the movie shows, William Wilberforce was among those who were significantly influenced by Newton's ministry. In fact, it was through Newton that Wilberforce was converted and persuaded to serve in politics rather than to enter the ministry. As a leading Member of Parliament, Wilberforce is credited with bringing the British slave trade to an end.

In Newton we discern the integration of faith and practice (creeds giving rise to deeds). Downplaying or denying sound doctrine in favor of "practical living," the moralistic preachers of the day largely ignored the plight of the slaves as well as the poor and mangled victims of the industrial revolution in their own country. At 82, Newton could say, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things, that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior." Far from dampening his enthusiasm for loving and serving his neighbor, the gospel of God's free grace was his engine.

Like Whitefield, Newton was on the Calvinist side of the Evangelical Awakening. In one of his sermons he explains,

The divine sovereignty is the best thought we can retreat to for composing and strengthening our minds under the difficulties, discouragements and disappointments which attend the publication of the gospel.... How many schemes derogatory to the free grace of God, tending to darken the glory of the gospel and to depreciate the righteousness of the Redeemer, have taken their rise from vain and unnecessary attempts to vindicate the ways of God— or rather to limit the actings of infinite wisdom to the bounds of our narrow understanding, to sound the depths of the divine counsels with our feeble plummets, and to say to Omnipotence, Hitherto shalt thou go, and no further. But upon the ground of the divine sovereignty we may rest satisfied and stable. For if God appoints and overrules all according to the purpose of his own will, we have sufficient security both for the present and the future (p. 296). (1)

Preaching on Psalm 51:15—"O Lord, open thou my lips, and my mouth shall show forth thy praise," Newton says,

But yet through a sense of past guilt, a sight of present corruptions, the prevalence of unbelief, the workings of a legal spirit, the want of a clear apprehension of the Lord's way of justifying the ungodly, and from the force of Satan's temptations (who is exceedingly busy to press all these things upon the heart), the mouths of these are likewise stopped. They cannot believe, and therefore they cannot speak.

Only when God grants them a glimpse of his grace in the gospel does he open their lips so that they may praise him. Newton says,

We need not dig in the earth nor climb in the skies nor cross the seas: our remedy is near (Rom. 10:6-8).... Come, gaze no longer upon your empty bottle but look to the fountain, the river, the ocean of all grace.... When Christ is out of sight we are deaf to all the calls, invitations and promises of the Scripture.

Only when we fix our eyes on his saving person and office are we free at last to praise him in our worship and daily life.

We discern in these statements the underlying message of Newton's "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds In A Believer's Ear!"-especially the sixth verse:

*Weak is the effort of my heart
And cold my warmest thought;
But when I see Thee as Thou art,
I'll praise Thee as I ought.*

In the latter part of his ministry (1784-85), in the heart of London, Newton preached a series on the biblical passages that form the substance of Handel's *Messiah*, just then enjoying a rerun at Westminster Abbey. In the introductory text (Isa. 40:1-2: "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned ..."), Newton says, the Mosaic covenant, though pointing to Christ, was itself a "legal" covenant, described in the New Testament as "weak," "a yoke," and "a burden," as well as "temporary." Newton explains, "There is a considerable analogy to this difference between the law and the gospel, as contradistinct from each other, in the previous distress of the sinner when he is made aware of his guilt and danger as a transgressor of the law of God, and the subsequent peace which he obtains by believing the gospel." The sight of God in his holiness brings us to despair but for the following clause: "Her iniquity is pardoned." The problem today, says Newton, is that few sense their guilt before God: "A free pardon is a comfort to a malefactor, but it implies guilt." Newton concludes, "So it is feared that for want of knowing themselves and their real estate in the sight of Him with whom we have to do, many persons who have received pleasure from the music of the Messiah have neither found, nor expected, nor desired to find any comfort from the words."

Hannah More, an evangelical cohort of Newton's and Wilberforce's in the abolition of the slave trade, writes that everyone speaks of "duties" rather than "doctrines," yet promotes the nefarious institution. Therefore, she says, "it is of importance to point out the mutual dependence of one doctrine upon another, and the influence which these doctrines have upon the heart and life, so that the *duties* of Christianity

may be seen to grow out of its *doctrines*" (emphasis in original).

Why Grace Is Strange

This small circle of influential evangelicals made a remarkable impact on the world in their vocations precisely because they were overwhelmed by God's amazing-and strange-grace that disrupts the ordinary flow of history. They did not treat the doctrine as a distraction from practice, but as its source. Of course, there are a lot of reasons why grace is strange, but we will consider briefly a few of the major ones here.

God is Strange

We work very hard to make God user-friendly. That's why the Israelites at the foot of Mount Sinai, terrified by God's voice, decided to make a golden calf that they could manage more safely. Instead of trembling in God's presence, they "sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play" (Exod. 32:6). We hear people talk today about their personal relationship with God as if he were a locker-room pal or even a romantic interest. However, when people were actually confronted with God's presence, they always came apart at the seams. Even Moses trembled with fear (Exod. 19-20; Heb. 12:18-29). Isaiah was all set to go on his mission to announce the woes (curses) on everybody else until he received a vision of God in his sanctuary, with seraphim and cherubim calling to each other, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts; His glory fills the whole earth." Isaiah could only respond, "Woe is me, for I am ruined, because I am a man of unclean lips and live among a people of unclean lips, and because my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts." Nevertheless, one of the seraphim brought a glowing coal to the prophet and, touching it to his lips, said, "Now that this has touched your lips, your wickedness is removed, and your sin is atoned for" (Isa. 6:3-7). Peter, hardly known for a reverent temperament, responded to the amazing catch of fish at Jesus' command, fell on his knees and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man" (Luke 5:8).

To confess that God is holy is to say that he is not only quantitatively but qualitatively different from us. In other words, he isn't simply better than we are, nicer, friendlier, more knowledgeable, more powerful, more loving. He is incomprehensible, unfathomable, unsearchable. We can only have

access to him because he has willed to be our God, revealing himself by speaking "baby talk"-accommodating to our frail capacities. Grace is God's willingness not only to condescend to our creaturely finitude even to the point of assuming our flesh, but to give his life for us "while we were still enemies" (Rom. 5:10).

God is intolerant of sin, but just as infinite in his love and long-suffering. God is just and righteous, unable to let bygones be bygones, and yet he is free to have mercy on whom he will have mercy. To have mercy on the wicked, however, God cannot suspend his justice. God's justice did not require the salvation of anyone, so his grace is totally free. When God is gracious toward sinners, it is not because his justice is sacrificed to his love, but because he has freely found a way to be "just and the justifier of the ungodly" (Rom. 3:26). At the cross, not only God's love but his strangeness-his utter difference from us-is most clearly displayed.

We Are Estranged

But none of this matters if we are not the wicked, the ungodly, the unrighteous, the enemies of God and countless other terms that Scripture uses to describe our condition. Created in God's image, to be analogies of his character, we were "wired" for righteousness. Obedience to God's commands came naturally. Inexplicably and absurdly, Adam chose to go his own way, be his own boss, and determine his own destiny. Of course, this did not lead to enthronement but to estrangement. Running from God, Adam and Eve covered their nakedness with fig leaves and we have been doing this ever since. Religion and morality (with the help of pop psychology) are the primary suppliers of fig leaves. Instead of speaking in biblical terms of our being "dead in sins," "strangers and aliens," "enemies," "children of wrath," "haters of God," and so forth, we typically talk now about humanity as basically decent folks needing direction. Grace, in this scenario, becomes a PowerBar to help us continue our autonomous journey of self-salvation and mastery of life. Grace can be a lot of things: a substance infused into us to dispose us toward cooperating with God (the Roman Catholic position and, I would argue, the working assumption of popular Evangelicalism). It can be "released," "injected," or "appropriated," by following certain secret principles (laws).

But in Scripture, grace is not an impersonal substance; it's the personal attitude and action of God in Jesus Christ toward those who deserve the very opposite. Without the phrase "who deserve the very opposite," grace is nothing more than God's warm wishes that make us feel better as we suppress the truth about ourselves. Because we always put a certain "spin" on our lives that, to our minds at least, gets us off the hook in court, we cannot tell ourselves who we are. The major reason that I dislike going to the doctor for my checkup is that the nurse weighs me and every time the result is less flattering than my own weighing-in at home. Our judgments about ourselves, not to mention about God and our neighbors, are made with a scale that has been tampered with, purposely jerry-rigged to tell us what we want to hear. Only when we actually encounter God as he truly is do we finally know ourselves as we truly are-and only then can grace be truly grace. Grace is not self-esteem, moral uplift, or therapeutic recovery. It is nothing less than God's favor on account of Christ: a new Word (justification) that generates a new creation (sanctification and glorification).

God's Method of Redemption Is Strange

People want to save themselves. "For to those who are perishing the message of the cross is foolishness, but to us who are being saved, it is God's power" (1 Cor. 1:18). Jews look for signs and Greeks look for wisdom (v. 22). If Jesus is interpreted as an itinerant sage who provides us with the right ideas, worldview, techniques, and rules for living well, we could expect success, but it would be short-lived. Eventually, when "converts" actually began reading the Bible, they would realize that its basic message is not "What Would Jesus Do?" Salvation (i.e., "your best life now") as following the example of a wise man made perfect sense to Greeks; salvation by dying and rising with him drew blank stares.

Nevertheless, we work very hard today to make grace normal rather than utterly disorienting. We bend over backwards to show how Christianity is "practical," how it conforms to our common sense and moral intuitions. "Practical Christianity" (deeds, not creeds) is touted, although the actual practice of Christians is, according to the statistics, indistinguishable from that of non-Christians. The "righteousness that is by works" looks for somewhere to go and something to do, while "the

righteousness of faith" receives Christ as he comes to us in the gospel (Rom. 10:1-13).

For Rome-and for many evangelicals today-however, grace is almost entirely something that happens inside of us, that wells up within us through our own efforts. The late Stanley Grenz, who had a tremendous impact on younger evangelicals, wanted to push the movement further away from the Reformation in the direction of inner spirituality and moral imperatives. Evangelicalism, he says, is more a "spirituality" than a "theology." (2) A call to rethink Evangelicalism's attachment to the Reformation's *solus* goes hand in hand with an emphasis on inner experience as the source not only of piety but of the Word itself. "Because spirituality is generated from within the individual, inner motivation is crucial"-more important, Grenz says, than "grand theological statements." "The spiritual life is above all the imitation of Christ.... In general we eschew religious ritual. Not slavish adherence to rites, but doing what Jesus would do is our concept of true discipleship." It would seem that the question, "What would Jesus *do*?" takes precedence over what Jesus *has done* and how he delivers that to us here and now.

"Get on with the task; get your life in order by practicing the aids to growth and see if you do not mature spiritually," we exhort. In fact, if a believer comes to the point where he or she senses that stagnation has set in, evangelical counsel is to redouble one's efforts in the task of exercising the disciplines. "Check up on yourself," the evangelical spiritual counselor admonishes.

Grenz pioneered the theology that Brian McLaren and some of the other "emergent" leaders are now taking to wild extremes. So let's have more emphasis on the activity of believers rather than of God? *More* imperatives without indicatives? *More* fire for the burned-over districts? One of the points that Grenz makes so clearly in his book, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, is that the "revisioning" in view is not radically different from the pietistic emphases of Evangelicalism. Until we return to the gospel of God's free and sovereign grace, there will be ever-new waves of burned-out Christians. Movements that center on the activity of sinners-including Christians-will never expose the world to the radical grace that is genuinely transformative.

Sharing a common heritage in the revivalism of Charles Finney, mainline and evangelical Protestants have trouble being *recipients* of grace. The church becomes an army of activists-social engineers, moral reformers, event planners, life coaches-rather than a theater of grace where God has the lead role. As a result, the focus is not on how God gets to us (the logic of grace) but on "inducements sufficient to convert sinners with," as Finney put it, following his basically Pelagian view of the moral ability of fallen people. Finney's *Systematic Theology* explicitly denies original sin and insists that the power of regeneration lies in the sinner's own hands; rejects any substitutionary notion of Christ's atonement in favor of the moral influence and moral government theories, and regards the doctrine of justification by an alien righteousness as "impossible and absurd," an offense to our sense of morality. (3) Nevertheless, Finney is celebrated as America's greatest revivalist by Jerry Falwell on the right and Jim Wallis on the left.

Concerning the complex doctrines that he associated with Calvinism (including original sin, vicarious atonement, justification and the supernatural character of the new birth), Finney concluded, "No doctrine is more dangerous than this to the prosperity of the Church, and nothing more absurd." In fact, "There is nothing in religion beyond the ordinary powers of nature. It consists in the right exercise of the powers of nature. It is just that, and nothing else.... It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means-as much so as any other effect produced by the application of means." (4) Find the most useful methods, "excitements sufficient to induce conversion," and there will be conversion. "God Has Established No Particular Measures" is the subheading of one of his chapters in his *Systematic Theology*. "A revival will decline and cease," he warned, "unless Christians are frequently re-converted." (5)

Toward the end of his ministry, as he considered the condition of many who had experienced his revivals, Finney wondered if this endless craving for ever-greater experiences of "grace" might lead to spiritual exhaustion. (6) In fact, his worries were justified. The area where Finney's revivals were especially dominant is now referred to by historians as the "burned-over district," a seedbed of both disillusionment and the proliferation of various cults. (7)

It does not seem wide of the mark to regard Finney's theological assumptions as Pelagian. If, as Bonhoeffer indicates, American religion has been decisively shaped by "Protestantism without the Reformation," then Finney is its clearest spokesperson. Evangelicalism's penchant for creating movement upon movement, each whipping millions up into a frenzy only to leave many disillusioned, has helped to create the very secularism that it spends so much time, energy, and money attacking in the wider culture.

When one visits a Christian gift store, listens to much of Christian radio, nearly anything of Christian television, and a great deal of Christian preaching today, the implicit Pelagianism of salvation (and church growth) by principles and techniques is evident on all sides. Combining Pelagianism and pragmatism, American Evangelicalism seems at least in its most popular forms today to be a version of spiritual technology—almost magic, with every new movement and best-selling author offering his or her own "Ten Steps" to harnessing God's power. In this context, grace is less God's favor shown to sinners on account of Christ than the opportunity God has provided for greater spiritual and moral power if we cooperate properly, using our free will. Newton the slave trader may indeed have been a "wretch," but surely not I.

Ever since the fall, we have insisted on judging and justifying ourselves. However, when it comes to the gospel of grace, we are only receivers, not doers. We follow the commands, but we believe the good news.

Once faith is seen as arising immediately out of the self, rather than created by the gospel, not only creation but redemption can be conceived in autonomous terms. God, the gospel, Christ, grace, and Scripture become tools for self-mastery rather than rival claimants to sovereignty. Grace is no longer disruptive and disorienting, but the sort of thing that anybody on the street can sing about without offense. Not surprisingly, a spate of recent sociological studies has indicated that the operating theology even of those reared in evangelical youth groups and churches can be described, in Christian Smith's formulation, as "moralistic, therapeutic deism." (8) As long as the church keeps muting the strange sound of grace, as if salvation were the result of human decision rather than God's electing grace before time began, our imitation of Christ rather than

Christ's unique and vicarious death for sinners, as if we are good people who could be better rather than the damned who need to be redeemed, the sort of genuine Christian experience that John Newton proclaimed in "Amazing Grace" will be increasingly rare.

Grace is not something that God *offers*, but the character of *his* saving action toward sinners: "while we were dead" and "while we were enemies." The kind of "grace" that many people talk about today does not require conversion in order to believe it, but assimilation and cooperation. There is no need for reconciliation, since God is already everyone's buddy. There is no need for repentance, since everyone is already trying to be good. There is no need for justification, since that presupposes guilt—and we know that guilt is simply a feeling that results from dysfunctional patterns. There is no need for peace with God, because we have never really been at war. Grace cannot be strange when the antitheses between God's holiness and our sinfulness, Christ's saving obedience and our disobedience, the Holy Spirit's sovereign call and the bondage of our will become muted.

We have to recover our recognition that the gospel itself is the main problem of communication: we think people can accept it without conversion. (9) Grace then becomes moral uplift, encouragement, divine assistance for whatever projects of self-salvation we are currently engaged in.

Methodist bishop William Willimon perceives that much of contemporary preaching, whether mainline or evangelical, assumes that conversion is something that we generate through our own words and sacraments. "In this respect we are heirs of Charles G. Finney," who thought that conversion was not a miracle but a "purely philosophical [i.e., scientific] result of the right use of the constituted means."

We have forgotten that there was once a time when evangelists were forced to defend their 'new measures' for revivals, that there was once a time when preachers had to defend their preoccupation with listener response to their Calvinist detractors who thought that the gospel was more important than its listeners. I am here arguing that revivals are miraculous, that the gospel is so odd, so against the grain of our natural inclinations and the infatuations of our culture, that nothing less than a miracle is required in order for there to be true hearing. My

position is therefore closer to that of the Calvinist Jonathan Edwards than to the position of Finney. (10)

Nevertheless, "The homiletical future, alas, lay with Finney rather than Edwards," leading to the evangelical church marketing guru, George Barna, who writes,

Jesus Christ was a communications specialist. He communicated His message in diverse ways, and with results that would be a credit to modern advertising and marketing agencies ... He promoted His product in the most efficient way possible: by communicating with the "hot prospects." ... He understood His product thoroughly, developed an unparalleled distribution system, advanced a method of promotion that has penetrated every continent, and offered His product at a price that is within the grasp of every consumer (without making the product so accessible that it lost its value). (11)

We never really get to the gospel if we ask the world-or even Christians-what they find most relevant apart from it. Instead, the gospel itself will become a form of law-perhaps subtler and more user-friendly ("Do this and you'll feel better!" or "Do this and you'll live better!" rather than "Do or die!"), but an agenda of things to do rather than an announcement of things that God has done.

Willimon also reminds us that preaching presupposes that it will "work" not because of its audience analysis but because of its confidence in the Spirit. If our preaching does not require a miracle in order to believe it, then it is not gospel preaching. (12)

The gospel is an intrusion among us, not something arising out of us. Easter is the ultimate intrusion of God. The gap between our alliance with death and the God of life as revealed on Easter is the ultimate gap with which gospel preaching must contend. Easter is an embarrassment the church can't get around. Yet this embarrassment is the engine that drives our preaching...If God did not triumph over Caesar and all the legions of death on Easter, then God will never triumph on Sunday in my church

over *The Wall Street Journal* and Leo Buscaglia. (13)

We do not bring Christ down by our clever efforts at translation and relevance; Christ comes down to us and creates his own atmosphere: confrontative as well as comforting. "Alas," adds Willimon, "most 'evangelistic' preaching I know about is an effort to drag people even deeper into their subjectivity rather than an attempt to rescue them from it." (14) "Our intellectual problem with the gospel is not one of meaning but really is about power. Not the limitedly intellectual problem of 'How can I believe this?' but rather 'In what power configurations am I presently enslaved?'" (15) This is why we need "an external word."

Willimon recognizes the close connection observed above between the method (an external Word) and the message (salvation by grace alone in Christ alone through faith alone). "So in a sense, we don't discover the gospel, it discovers us. 'You did not choose me but I chose you' (John 15:16)." (16) "Self-salvation is the goal of much of our preaching," Willimon surmises. (17) By contrast, Scripture repeatedly underscores the point that the gospel is new news, not merely a new awareness. "To be a Christian is to be part of the community, the countercultural community, formed by thinking with a peculiar story. The story is *euangelion*, good news, because it is about grace. Yet it is also news because it is not common knowledge, not what nine out of ten average Americans already know. Gospel doesn't come naturally. It comes as Jesus." (18)

Grace can only be recognized in the face of Christ, for there the strangeness of God, of ourselves, and God's method of redemption converge. Counter-intuitive, disruptive, and unsettling, the grace defined by Golgotha requires an entirely new set of presuppositions about God, ourselves, and how the relationship works. Yet the measure of the sheer gratuity of God's grace is that it even gives us those new presuppositions in the very act of being given. Grace is God's refusal to allow us to define ourselves or to have the last word. Rather, it is the surprising announcement that salvation is "not the result of human decision or effort, but of God who shows mercy" (Rom. 9:16).

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- 1 [[Back](#)] All citations from John Newton in this article have been drawn from David Lyle Jeffrey, ed., *English Spirituality in the Age of Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).
 - 2 [[Back](#)] Stanley Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1993), especially pp. 17, 31, 48-52.
 - 3 [[Back](#)] Charles G. Finney, *Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1976).
 - 4 [[Back](#)] Charles G. Finney, *Revivals of Religion* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, n.d.), pp. 4-5.
 - 5 [[Back](#)] Finney, *Revivals of Religion*, p. 321.
 - 6 [[Back](#)] See Keith J. Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney: Revivalist and Reformer* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), pp. 380-394.
 - 7 [[Back](#)] See, for example, Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982).
 - 8 [[Back](#)] Christian Smith, *Soul Searching* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
 - 9 [[Back](#)] William Willimon, *The Intrusive Word: Preaching to the Unbaptized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 18-19.
 - 10 [[Back](#)] Willimon, p. 20.
 - 11 [[Back](#)] Willimon, p. 21, citing George Barna, *Marketing the Church: What They Never Taught You about Church Growth* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988), p. 50.
 - 12 [[Back](#)] Willimon, p. 22.
 - 13 [[Back](#)] Willimon, p. 25.
 - 14 [[Back](#)] Willimon, p. 38.
 - 15 [[Back](#)] Willimon, p. 42.
 - 16 [[Back](#)] Willimon, p. 43.
 - 17 [[Back](#)] Willimon, p. 53.
 - 18 [[Back](#)] Willimon, p. 52.

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