

THE CONCEPT OF “GRACE” IN WORLD RELIGIONS

by

David W. Hester

Stone-Campbell Journal Conference

Johnson University

March 20-21, 2020

THE CONCEPT OF “GRACE” IN WORLD RELIGIONS

Few subjects need to be studied today more than that of grace. This is true in light of modern attitudes toward religion in general. What Davis wrote in 1966 is just as true today: “The West is now undergoing a single cultural development. Viewed positively, this is the assertion of secular reality: viewed negatively, it is the rejection of the Christian faith.”¹

Because of the disillusionment with traditional religion, many have explored non-traditional religions, such as the Eastern religions and Islam. Subsequently, they are exposed to an understanding of “grace” that is in some respects similar to that taught in “Christendom” and even Judaism, but diverges from those understandings significantly. Thus, while the language may be familiar, the concepts that are presented are quite different.

The purpose of this study is to examine “grace” as understood by the major world religions. In doing so, what the Bible teaches on the subject must be presented, as well as a definition given of what is meant by the word “grace.” Quite often, the definition of a word is critical—no more so than in this study. Then, each major religion will be addressed—with its teaching on grace compared to that of the Bible and other religions. It is hoped that this study will be profitable in promoting understanding of other religions and their beliefs—so that an understanding of God’s will may be fostered.

¹Charles Davis, *God’s Grace In History* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966), 15.

“Grace” Defined

The Greek word *charis*, translated “grace,” is defined as “that which one grants to another, the action of one who volunteers to do something to which he is not bound.”² Grace, when understood in this context, cannot be earned, nor can it be deserved. It is given as a gift by God to sinful man. With justice, man gets what deserves. With mercy, man does not get what he deserves. But, with grace, man gets what he does not deserve. Using each letter of the word itself, one could define “grace” as “God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense.” That gives a better picture, but not one that is complete.

Biblical Teaching on “Grace”

Grace is not just a New Testament subject. Almost from the beginning of the Bible, it is present. Genesis 3:15 has often been cited as the first (veiled) reference to a Messiah, coming as it does on the heels of Adam and Eve’s sin: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel.” In Genesis 6:8, the King James Version reads, “Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord.” While other translations substitute the word “favor,” it is clear that the same idea is present.

Even a casual reading of the Old Testament indicates that God’s grace was manifested toward people and nations—even Gentiles—who were not deserving. Melchizedek, who met and blessed Abraham after the slaughter of the kings, was “king of Salem” and “priest of God most high” (Gen. 14:18). Israel herself was a recipient of the grace of God; Ezekiel 16 clearly sets forth the fact that Israel’s success as a nation did

²William F. Arndt & F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed. rev. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979), 877.

not come because she deserved it; God said she was “perfect because of My splendor which I bestowed” (Eze. 16:14). However, Israel fell because she trusted in her own ability (Eze. 16:15).

Nineveh’s repentance at the preaching of Jonah gives a vivid example of an entire Gentile city that turned to God. Jonah could not comprehend God’s grace in delivering the city, yet God clearly indicated that His grace was at work. Naaman the Syrian was a Gentile who was healed by the prophet of the Lord. Jesus even used his healing as an example in His first public sermon. God’s unmerited favor was clearly at work during the Old Testament period.

John 1:17 declares, “For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.” This succinctly summarizes the difference between the Old and New Testaments. Grace, in its fullness, was demonstrated through a person—Jesus Christ. Ephesians 2:4-5 clearly sets forth the meaning of grace: “But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved).” Romans 5:6-10 is emphatic in its proclamation of God’s grace:

For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.

All of these passages assume that human beings sin and thereby need salvation. “For all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). “There is no man who does not sin” (1 Ki. 8:46). “There is a way which seems right unto a man, but its end

is the way of death” (Pro. 14:12). The prophet is emphatic: “I know, O Lord, that a man’s way is not in himself, nor is it in a man who walks to direct his steps” (Jer. 10:23). Paul further explains mankind’s predicament in Romans 3:10-18:

There is none righteous, not even one: there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one. Their throat is an open grave, with their tongues they keep deceiving, the poison of asps is under their lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness: their feet are swift to shed blood, destruction and misery are in their paths, and the path of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes.

Grace is not unconditional; it must be received. The New Testament emphasizes this. “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God” (Rom. 5:1-2). Ephesians 2:8-9 affirms the same principle: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” The “works” in this passage indicate meritorious works. The Scriptures clearly indicate that the faith that saves the soul is the faith that is obedient to God’s will. This is not slavish obedience out of fear of a tyrannical despot, but rather a loving devotion to the Heavenly Father. Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep My commandments” (Jn. 14:15). Paul speaks of “the obedience of faith” (Rom. 1:5).

The alien sinner must believe in Jesus as the Son of God: “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (Jn. 3:16). He must turn from sin in repentance: “Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent” (Acts 17:30). Confession of his faith in the risen Lord is

necessary: “that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation” (Rom.10:9-10). Then, he must be immersed for the forgiveness of sins: “He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned” (Mk. 16:16). It is at this point that the blood of Jesus cleanses his soul of sin: “For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin.” (Rom. 6:5-7). The child of God continues to receive the benefits of God’s grace as he “walks in the light;” the blood of Jesus continually cleanses him from sin (1 Jn. 1:7-9).

For the purposes of this study, “grace” is defined as the undeserved favor of God through all ages of history—ultimately made manifest in its fullness through Jesus Christ and His complete written revelation. Such grace may be accepted by human beings through obedient faith in what Jesus has required. By no means is this earned, or deserved; rather, it is acceptance of the gift of salvation. The teachings of world religions on the subject of grace must be considered in this light. In so doing, the Bible will be the ultimate standard.

“Grace” and Hinduism/Buddhism

The Eastern religions are still unfamiliar to many Westerners. Because of that unfamiliarity, the teachings of Hinduism and Buddhism are ignored. As a result, some promote the view that there is not much difference between the Eastern religions and Christianity on the subject of grace (Hinduism and Buddhism are grouped together in this study because of their close kinship to each another). Minor affirms that Hinduism itself is difficult to define: “The more one studies the religions of others, the more one finds that there is nothing that all people who call themselves Hindus, for example, hold in common.”³ Minor critiques the apologetic approach that ignores the differences that exist in Hinduism and defines the whole religion by just one faction. “The fact is that all devotees of Vishnu do not believe the same thing.”⁴ He decries, “Yet the evangelical community has often approached others without understanding their beliefs.”⁵ This point is well taken.

However, when one examines Hindu teachings carefully, a pattern emerges: although lip service is paid to the *word* “grace,” it is the *concept* that is different from that taught in the Bible. The following is how a Hindu website defines the term:

The grace of Gita cannot be described. Its teachings are simple as well as abstruse and profound. New and deeper meanings are revealed to a serious student of the Gita, and the teachings remain ever inspirational. The interest in a serious study of the Gita is not available to all but to those with good Karma only. One should be very earnest in the study of the Gita. When one realizes Him by His grace, the knots of ignorance are loosened, all doubts and confusion are dispelled, and all

³Robert N. Minor, “Understanding as the First Step in an Evangelical Approach to World Religions: Some Methodological Considerations,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 19/2 (Spring 1976), 125.

⁴*Ibid.*, 127.

⁵*Ibid.*, 121.

Karma is exhausted. The true knowledge of the Supreme Being comes only by His grace.⁶

Consider this definition by Swami Prakashanand Saraswati: “Grace is the personal power of God which is synonymous to His Blissful personality. Thus, Grace itself is the Divine Bliss. God’s Grace or a Saint’s Grace is the same, because the power of Grace is only one absolute entity that reveals the knowledge, vision and Divine love of God.”⁷ Ponder this explanation by Swami Bhaskarananda: “God’s grace, according to Hinduism, is unconditional and impartial. Like the sun shining equally on the good and evil, God showers his grace equally on all. A good person uses God’s grace for a good purpose and benefits from it, while a bad person uses God’s grace for a bad purpose, and thereby causes harm to himself.”⁸

In spite of all these seemingly diverse definitions, there is a common thread that runs throughout: man must earn his “salvation.” Consider what the founder of the International Gita Society, Ramananda Prasad, asserts:

It is the divine grace or power that comes in the form of self-effort. The divine grace and self-effort, as well as dualism (Dvaitism) and monism (Advaitism) are nothing but the two sides of the same coin of Reality. The grace of God is always available — one has to collect it. To win the grace is not easy. One has to earn it by sincere spiritual discipline (Sadhana) and effort. Grace is the cream of that effort — our own good Karma. It is said that self-effort is absolutely necessary, but the last rung of the ladder to the Supreme is not Sadhana or the self-effort but praying for His grace in the spirit of surrender.⁹

⁶Hinduismnet.com—“Grace of the Bhagavad Gita,”
http://www.hinduismnet.com/bhagavad_gita.htm

⁷Swami Prakashanand Saraswati, “Encyclopedia of Authentic Hinduism,”
<http://encyclopediaofauthentichinduism.org/glossary.htm>

⁸Swami Bhaskarananda, “Hinduism in a Nutshell—God’s Grace,”
<http://www.vedanta-seattle.org/pages/hinduism.html>

⁹Ramananda Prasad, “Bhagavad-Gita: Teachings of Krishna/Hinduism On The Art Of Peaceful Living International Gita Society—The Fifth Track of Spiritual Journey,”
<http://www.gita-society.com/?html=fifthtrack>

Prasad continues:

It is said that divinity is our birth-right; however, self-effort in the right direction is also necessary to remove hindrances brought about by our own past deeds. The grace of God also comes expeditiously through our own efforts. It is also believed that divine grace and self-effort are one and the same. Self-effort promotes the process of God-realization as manure promotes growth of plants.¹⁰

As for Buddhism, Minor seems to intimate that there is no difference at all. Commenting on some members of the Jodo Shinshu, he affirms that “there seems to be no question” but that they believe in grace, as defined by Christianity.¹¹ However, he goes on to say, “For example, Shinran Shonin (1173-1263), the founder of this religion, believed that one could reach the Pure Land at death on the basis of the merits of Amida Buddha (a Perfect Being who had earned infinite merit to give away) and that all deeds done by oneself were of no avail.¹² Viewed this way, there would seem to be no difference. Yet, Buddhism emphasizes man’s earning his way to “Nirvana.”

In Hinduism and Buddhism, the central teaching of karma rules out grace completely. Karma is the law of cause and effect that operates within all life. Men are said to ascend the ladder (like the game of snakes and ladders) of improvement towards salvation by their good deeds. In Hinduism, the doctrine of reincarnation is also a factor. Lower castes and those who suffer are reaping the result of bad karma; higher castes and those who do well in this life are reaping the benefits of good karma accrued through good deeds and duty in a previous life. Through many reincarnations a man can then expect to ascend by good works through the insects and animals and castes to finally reach moksha (salvation). As for Buddhism, the philosophy itself is highly cynical; it

¹⁰Ibid., <http://www.gita-society.com/?html=freewill&vs=05>

¹¹Minor, 122.

¹²Ibid.

looks at reality with a sneer and focuses instead on the “inner self” almost to the exclusion of all others. Grace, as understood from the Scriptures, is almost non-existent. Thus, while “Pure Land” Buddhism teaches something akin to the Biblical concept of grace, it is an anomaly—and even then, Jesus Christ is nowhere to be found.

“Grace” and Islam

In Islam, forgiveness is based on a combination of Allah's “grace” and the Muslim's works. On the Day of Judgment, if a Muslim's good works outweigh his bad ones, and if Allah so wills it, he may be forgiven of all his sins and then enter into Paradise. Therefore, Islam is a religion of salvation by works because it combines man's works with Allah's grace. Consider the following verses from the Qur'an:

And as to those who believe and do good deeds, He will pay them fully their rewards; and Allah does not love the unjust (Surah 3:57).

Then as for those who believe and do good, He will pay them fully their rewards and give them more out of His grace; and as for those who disdain and are proud, He will chastise them with a painful chastisement. And they shall not find for themselves besides Allah a guardian or a helper (Surah 4:173).

From these passages alone, it is clear that the Islamic view of “grace” is virtually non-existent. While the word is used, on occasion, in reference to Allah, it is not extended in any meaningful way to humanity. Indeed, man's salvation is achieved through his own works. That this is the case is confirmed by two more passages from the Qur'an:

You will see the unjust fearing on account of what they have earned, and it must befall them; and those who believe and do good shall be in the meadows of the gardens; they shall have what they please with their Lord: that is the great grace. That is of which Allah gives the good news to His servants, (to) those who believe and do good deeds. Say: I do not ask of you any reward for it but love for my near relatives; and whoever earns good, We give him more of good therein; surely Allah is Forgiving, Grateful. Or do they say: He has forged a lie against Allah? But if Allah pleased, He would seal your heart; and Allah will blot out the

falsehood and confirm the truth with His words; surely He is Cognizant of what is in the breasts. And He it is Who accepts repentance from His servants and pardons the evil deeds and He knows what you do; and He answers those who believe and do good deeds, and gives them more out of His grace; and (as for) the unbelievers, they shall have a severe punishment (Surah 42:22-26).

And your Lord will most surely pay back to all their deeds in full; surely He is aware of what they do...And keep up prayer in the two parts of the day and in the first hours of the night; surely good deeds take away evil deeds this is a reminder to the mindful. And be patient, for surely Allah does not waste the reward of the good-doers (Surah 11:111-12, 114-15).

The Qur'an also indicates that Allah will overlook the evil deeds of those who are Muslims: "Those are they from whom we accept the best of what they do, and overlook their evil deeds. (They are) among the owners of the Garden. This is the true promise which they were promised (in the world)" (Surah 46:16).

The Qur'an also denies that Jesus died on the cross and was raised from the dead (Surah 4:157-58). Muhammad's aversion to Jesus' death as reflected in the Qur'an could have been motivated by several factors. Perhaps it was due to the influence of Gnostic views. It may have been because of his disdain for the "superstitious veneration" of the symbol of the cross in seventh-century Asia. Or, it could have resulted from his disbelief that God would allow one of His prophets to die in such a disgraceful manner. Of these possibilities, the latter is the most likely candidate.

Islam has no place for a suffering savior in its redemptive system. It does not view human beings as enslaved by sin without the ability of self-emancipation. Though it emphasizes the role of God's mercy and forgiveness in salvation, Islam teaches that God's pleasure, and thus one's place in Heaven, are earned. On the Day of Judgment—according to Islam—those who have fulfilled their religious duties, and compensated for

their altruistic deficiencies by performing additional good deeds, will attain salvation. The concept of grace, as extended to sinful man, is foreign to Islam.

“Grace” and Judaism

Judaism, with its roots in the Old Testament, has an understanding of “grace” that is closer to the truth. *The Jewish Encyclopedia* gives a lengthy definition of “divine grace” which appeals to the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms.¹³ Indeed, the Jewish concept of grace is similar to that of Christianity. However, the way mankind responds to Jehovah’s grace is different. Hertzberg asserts,

There is a divinely appointed remedy which each man can and must apply to himself: the life of Torah. The Torah is the only remedy for the impulse to evil. Whoever thinks that he can be helped without it is mistaken and will realize his error when he dies for his sins. Man’s impulse to evil is truly very strong and unbeknown to him it gradually prevails over and dominates him.¹⁴

The Torah is the way to salvation, according to Jewish thought. The idea of personal salvation through a person—a Messiah—is not one that is entertained in mainstream Jewish teaching. Indeed, the “Messiah” affects the *nation* more than the *person*. Hertzberg gives the common understanding of the nature of the Messiah:

Maimonides reflects the more realistic tendency. The Messiah will indeed be a king from the house of David who will gather the scattered of Israel together, but the order of the world will not be radically changed by his coming. There will be a world of peace and justice, a world perfected to the level that Jewish teaching imagined for a humanity that is truly obedient to the teachings of the Torah, but there will be no radical change in the order of creation.¹⁵

Thus, the emphasis is upon what man does, based on Torah. His trust is not placed in a perfect sin-offering; on the contrary, as Hertzberg asserts, “Man can descend to great

¹³Jewish Encyclopedia, “Divine Grace,”

http://bible.tmtm.com/wiki/GRACE%2C_DIVINE_%28Jewish_Encyclopedia%29

¹⁴Arthur Hertzberg, ed. *Judaism* (New York: George Braziller, 1962), 199.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 218.

depths, but he is not by nature irretrievably sinful.”¹⁶ His trust, rather, is placed in his ability to obey the Torah. “The essential rule of conduct is *imitatio Dei*, the imitation of God. No matter what his circumstances, man can so organize his life that this is the basic principle of his conduct.”¹⁷ Man’s ability is emphasized; he is assumed to have the ability to earn his “salvation.” Hertzberg quotes from Moses Luzatto in driving home his point:

If you will delve into the matter, you will realize that the world was created for man’s use. Surely the fate of the world depends upon the conduct of man. If a man is attracted by things of this world and is estranged from his Creator, he is corrupted and he can corrupt the entire world along with him. However, if he controls himself, cleaves to his Creator and makes use of the world only to the degree that it helps him in serving His creator, he raises himself to a higher level of existence and the world rises with him. For it is of great significance to all things created when they serve the perfect man who is sanctified with the holiness of God, praised be He.¹⁸

Judaism comes closer to the biblical concept of grace. It properly emphasizes the divine mercy and loving kindness of Jehovah, and stresses man’s responsibility for his own conduct. Yet, Judaism falls far short. It does not acknowledge the need for a perfect sin offering for man’s sins; it places far too much trust in man’s own ability to overcome his shortcomings.

“Grace” and Catholicism

According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, there is a distinction made in Catholicism between what is called “actual grace” and “sanctifying grace:”

Sanctifying grace is an habitual gift, a stable and supernatural disposition that perfects the soul itself to enable it to live with God, to act by his love. *Habitual grace*, the permanent disposition to live and act in keeping with God’s call, is distinguished from *actual graces* which refer to God’s

¹⁶Ibid., 178.

¹⁷Ibid., 185.

¹⁸Ibid., 194.

interventions, whether at the beginning of conversion or in the course of the work of sanctification.¹⁹

Brantl defines “sanctifying grace” as “a supernatural, transient help given to enlighten the mind and strengthen the will in the performance of supernatural acts.”²⁰

He further writes:

Habitual or sanctifying grace is a supernatural quality inherent in the soul which makes the soul partake of the divine nature and divine life in a real manner. The presence of sanctifying grace in the soul makes the soul pure and pleasing to God: such a soul is the spiritual temple of God. The presence of grace places the soul in the supernatural order.²¹

The *Catholic Encyclopedia* asserts, “The real nature of sanctifying grace is, by reason of its direct invisibility, veiled in mystery, so that we can learn its nature better by a study of its formal operations in the soul than by a study of the grace itself.”²² Brantl, however, is not as circumspect. Instead of focusing on responding to controversies with Protestantism, as the *Catholic Encyclopedia* does, he instead concentrates his attention on explaining the basic teachings of Catholicism on the subject. He says, “The growth into the unity of the Church is a growth in grace.”²³ This is based on the assumption that the Catholic Church itself is the repository of God’s grace on earth:

The Church is in the fullest sense an organism: it lives by the interior, spiritual unity of grace which is visible expressed through the human form of the institutional Church...The life-principle of the Church is grace, that gift of God which confers a new life on souls, a sharing in the life of God Himself.²⁴

¹⁹*Catechism of the Catholic Church*,
http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P1C.HTM

²⁰George Brantl, ed. *Catholicism* (New York: George Braziller, 1962), 111.

²¹Ibid.

²²*Catholic Encyclopedia*, “Sanctifying Grace,”
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06701a.htm>

²³Brantl, 112.

²⁴Ibid., 110-11.

Thus, according to this teaching, any and all things that are done within the Catholic Church are considered to be non-meritorious. Indeed, Brantl quotes from the Council of Trent, which asserts that, outside of the Catholic Church, “good works” are “nowise agreeable to God and meritorious.”²⁵ Conversely, those same works done within the Catholic Church are “considered as having fully satisfied the divine Law...and truly merited the attainment of eternal life in due time, if they die in the state of grace,”²⁶ that is, in the Catholic Church. Additionally, Brantl makes an amazing statement: “If man does good works in honor of God, then aided by divine grace, they are indeed meritorious.”²⁷

As to the question of what one must do to receive “sanctifying grace,” the *Catholic Encyclopedia* gives an involved explanation.²⁸ Yet, Brantl states, “The Catholic Church teaches that the two principal means of obtaining grace are prayer and the reception of the sacraments.”²⁹ These seven “sacraments” are: Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Eucharist, Penance, Extreme Unction, Holy Orders and Matrimony.³⁰ According to Brantl, “Each sacrament produces a twofold grace: sanctifying grace and a special actual grace which is called sacramental grace.”³¹ As he puts it, “The effect of the sacraments is to impart grace *ex opera operato* (by the deed done), that is in virtue of the sacramental act itself if no obstacle is placed in the way.”³²

²⁵Ibid., 110.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid., 111.

²⁸*Catholic Encyclopedia*, “Sanctifying Grace.”

²⁹Brantl, 112.

³⁰Ibid., 115.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid.

Catholicism also teaches the doctrine of total hereditary depravity. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms,

Following St. Paul, the Church has always taught that the overwhelming misery which oppresses men and their inclination towards evil and death cannot be understood apart from their connection with Adam's sin and the fact that he has transmitted to us a sin with which we are all born afflicted, a sin which is the "death of the soul". Because of this certainty of faith, the Church baptizes for the remission of sins even tiny infants who have not committed personal sin.³³

As Brantl states, "This sin of Adam lost Grace not only for Adam but for his descendants. It introduced sinfulness as a condition and a tendency in man. All men after Adam would be born with the taint of the Original Sin, inherited guilt: the race would be blighted and live centuries of longing for a Redeemer."³⁴

The Council of Trent went a step farther:

If any one does not confess that the first man, Adam, when he had transgressed the commandment of God in Paradise, immediately lost the holiness and justice wherein he had been constituted; and that he incurred, through the offence of that prevarication, the wrath and indignation of God, and consequently death, with which God had previously threatened him, and, together with death, captivity under his power who thenceforth had the empire of death, that is to say, the devil, and that the entire Adam, through that offence of prevarication, was changed, in body and soul, for the worse; let him be anathema. If anyone asserts, that the prevarication of Adam injured himself alone, and not his posterity; and that the holiness and justice, received of God, which he lost, he lost for himself alone, and not for us also; or that he, being defiled by the sin of disobedience, has only transfused death, and pains of the body, into the whole human race, but not sin also, which is the death of the soul; let him be anathema.³⁵

Thus, if one accepts the teaching that the Church is the repository of God's grace, it follows (according to this philosophy) that salvation is only to be found in the Catholic

³³*Catechism of the Catholic Church*,
http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P1C.HTM

³⁴Brantl, 59.

³⁵Hanover Historical Texts Project, "The Council of Trent—The Fifth Session,"
<http://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/ct05.html>

Church. Indeed, the Fourth Lateran Council asserts, “There is one Universal Church of the faithful, outside of which there is absolutely no salvation.”³⁶ A decree from Pius XII goes even further:

Now, in the first place, the Church teaches that in this matter there is question of a most strict command of Jesus Christ. For He explicitly enjoined on His apostles to teach all nations to observe all things whatsoever He Himself had commanded (Matt. 28: 19-20). Now, among the commandments of Christ, that one holds not the least place by which we are commanded to be incorporated by baptism into the Mystical Body of Christ, which is the Church, and to remain united to Christ and to His Vicar, through whom He Himself in a visible manner governs the Church on earth. Therefore, no one will be saved who, knowing the Church to have been divinely established by Christ, nevertheless refuses to submit to the Church or withholds obedience from the Roman Pontiff, the Vicar of Christ on earth.³⁷

So, although Catholicism on its surface acknowledges grace as taught in the New Testament, it goes far beyond what the Scriptures teach to introduce concepts not expressly taught in God’s Word. Indeed, one must first accept the notion that the Catholic Church is the “mystical body of Christ,” and that the Pope is the “Vicar of Christ on earth” in order to acquiesce to the Catholic concepts of grace. When these two presuppositions are rejected, the whole system collapses.

“Grace” and Protestantism

When one examines Protestant teaching on grace, it becomes immediately clear that there are many nuances—each pertaining to its specific denomination. That being said, one only needs to examine the major creeds of Protestantism to perceive a common thread. Protestantism itself “must be seen as a movement which gives form to the

³⁶Medieval Sourcebook: Twelfth Ecumenical Council: Lateran IV 1215, “The Canons of the Fourth Lateran Council, 1215, Canon 1,”

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/lateran4.html>

³⁷Richard J. Cushing, Archbishop of Boston – *Decree Regarding Leonard Feeney*, April 18, 1949, <http://www.romancatholicism.org/feeney-condemnations.htm>

awakened spirit of man.”³⁸ Of the various groups of individuals that gave birth to the Protestant movement, Dunstan comments:

These and other similar organizations and groups differed from each other in their teachings and their structure and the work they did; but all of them purposed to find religious life in the personal experience of men rather than through the ministrations of the Church. That is to say, they found the authority for man’s relation to God within man and not in the Church.³⁹

The *Augsburg Confession* (1530) affirms the doctrine of Original Sin: “Since the fall of Adam all men begotten in the natural way are born with sin, that is, without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with concupiscence.”⁴⁰ Of grace, it continues:

Men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor, and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for our sins.⁴¹

The *Belgic Confession* (1561) is similar in thought. Concerning Original Sin, it asserts: “We believe that, through the disobedience of Adam, original sin is extended to all mankind...”⁴² As to how one appropriates the benefits of God’s grace, it affirms: “Therefore we justly say with Paul, that we are justified by faith alone, or by faith without works.”⁴³ One may peruse all of the major Confessions of faith, and the same tenets are stressed.

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646) adequately summarizes traditional Protestant thought. Of Original Sin, it says:

By this sin they fell from their original righteousness and communion, with God, and so became dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the parts and

³⁸J. Leslie Dunstan, *Protestantism* (New York: Braziller, 1962), 25.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 26.

⁴⁰*The Augsburg Confession*, <http://www.ctsfw.edu/etext/boc/ac/augustana02.asc>

⁴¹*Ibid.*, <http://www.ctsfw.edu/etext/boc/ac/augustana04.asc>

⁴²*The Belgic Confession of Faith*, http://www.prca.org/bc_text1.html#a15

⁴³*Ibid.*

faculties of soul and body. They being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed; and the same death in sin, and corrupted nature, conveyed to all their posterity descending from them by ordinary generation.⁴⁴

Concerning justification,

Those whom God effectually calls, He also freely justifies; not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; nor by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness; but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on Him and His righteousness by faith; which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God.⁴⁵

It continues,

All those that are justified, God vouchsafes, in and for His only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption, by which they are taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God, have His name put upon them, receive the spirit of adoption, have access to the throne of grace with boldness, are enabled to cry, Abba, Father, are pitied, protected, provided for, and chastened by Him as by a Father: yet never cast off, but sealed to the day of redemption; and inherit the promises, as heirs of everlasting salvation.⁴⁶

The basic beliefs of traditional Protestantism concerning grace and salvation are expressed in what is called “The Five Soli:” By grace alone (*Sola Gratia*), through faith alone (*Sola Fide*), in Christ alone (*Solus Christus*), according to Scripture alone (*Sola Scriptura*), for God's glory alone (*Soli Deo Gloria*).⁴⁷

Dunstan, however, tries to point in a different direction. In attempting to steer a course between the opposite poles of Conservatism and Liberalism, he tries to articulate a

⁴⁴*Westminster Confession of Faith*,
http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷*Introduction to Protestantism*, “The Five Soli,”
<http://protestant.christianityinview.com/solas.html>

“middle position.” This is the case when he addresses grace and salvation. Quoting Horton and Keller at length, he asserts:

God in His free outgoing love justifies and sanctifies us through Christ, and His grace thus manifested is appropriated by faith, which itself is the gift of God...Justification is the act of God, whereby He forgives our sins and brings us into fellowship with Himself...For Christian faith, sin and grace are not two single and separate items, but correlated facts. Grace exists only for the sinner, and we only speak of sin in respect of grace, which is the central meaning of the principal dogma of the Reformation, justification by faith. This dogma declares that the sinner is justified by a sovereign act of God through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. He is saved by a decree of God's judgment alone and not by any merit or synergistic co-operation of man, or by subsequent sanctification.⁴⁸

Although Dunstan attempts to articulate a “middle way,” he actually repeats what mainstream Protestant thought had expressed over the centuries: thus, the title of the chapter in which he discusses grace is called, “The Main Stream: The Principles.” Actually, mainstream Protestantism is remarkably similar in its teachings on sin and salvation, regardless of the differences that abound over other doctrines and practices. Calvinist theology dominated Protestantism for many centuries. In recent decades, though, several of the tenets of Calvinism have been rejected by mainstream Protestantism. Indeed, there are those within the Protestant movement who embrace ecumenism to the point of extending God's grace to non-traditional religions. Song writes:

But if it is God's grace and not our faith that puts us in the right with God, is it not possible that this same grace of God also puts people of other religions in the right with God when signs of God's grace are perceived among them...God's grace is not God's grace if it can be controlled by our faith. We underestimate the power of God's forgiving love if we think we can limit it within our belief system. And the grace of God is no longer grace when God's acceptance of those outside the Christian church depends on the scrutiny of our theological orthodoxy...A theology of religions as a theology of God's

⁴⁸Dunstan, 208-09.

reign must then be a theology of “justification *by grace* through faith” with the primary stress and accent on “by grace,” by God’s grace. This would open us to the miracles of God’s reign in the life and history of other nations and peoples. And we Christians would be richer and more blessed for that.⁴⁹

Even the late Billy Graham was not immune to this ecumenism. In a televised conversation with Robert Schuller, he said:

Whether they come from the Muslim world, or the Buddhist world, or the Christian world or the non-believing world, they are members of the body of Christ because they've been called by God. They may not even know the name of Jesus but they know in their hearts that they need something that they don't have, and they turn to the only light that they have, and I think that they are saved, and that they're going to be with us in heaven. I believe that. I've met people in various parts of the world in tribal situations, that they have never seen a Bible or heard about a Bible, and never heard of Jesus, but they've believed in their hearts that there was a God, and they've tried to live a life that was quite apart from the surrounding community in which they lived.⁵⁰

This way of thinking is the ultimate end of the ecumenical movement. God’s grace is expanded to the point that it matters not who one puts his trust in as “savior;” all that matters is the belief in a supreme Deity—whether Jehovah, Allah, or Krishna.

Protestant teaching on the subject of grace is closer to the Scriptures than that of Catholicism, but still falls short on numerous counts. The affirmation of *sola fide* contradicts numerous biblical passages, several of which were stressed at the outset of the study. James 2 emphasizes the inadequacy of faith alone to justify the soul. Throughout the New Testament, the faith that saves is a faith that is obedient to the primary commands of the Gospel of Christ. Far from teaching total hereditary depravity, the Scriptures affirm that infants do not inherit the sins of their ancestors. In a remarkable

⁴⁹Choan-Seng Song, “The Power of God’s Grace in the World of Religions,” *Ecumenical Review* 39/1 (Jan. 1987), 54-55.

⁵⁰Television interview of Billy Graham by Robert Schuller, May 31, 1997, <http://www.wayoflife.org/fbns/fbns/fbns15.html>

passage, Jehovah makes assertions that strike at the very heart of mainstream Protestantism, as well as Catholicism, on the subject of grace:

The person who sins will die. The son will not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son's iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself. But if the wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed and observes all My statutes and practices justice and righteousness, he shall surely live; he shall not die. All his transgressions which he has committed will not be remembered against him; because of his righteousness which he has practiced, he will live. Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, rather than that he should turn from his ways and live? But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity and does according to all the abominations that a wicked man does, will he live? All his righteous deeds which he has done will not be remembered for his treachery which he has committed and his sin which he has committed; for them he will die. Yet you say, "The way of the Lord is not right." Hear now, O house of Israel! Is My way not right? Is it not your ways that are not right? When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity and dies because of it, for his iniquity which he has committed he will die. Again, when a wicked man turns away from his wickedness which he has committed and practices justice and righteousness, he will save his life. Because he considered and turned away from all his transgressions which he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die. But the house of Israel says, "The way of the Lord is not right." Are My ways not right, O house of Israel? Is it not your ways that are not right (Eze. 18:20-29)?

Conclusion

The great theme of God's amazing grace must be preached and taught today as at no other time in human history. The challenge to God's people is to not only live the Truth, but also to articulate it. That Truth must not be watered down or replaced with human philosophy, but proclaimed in its purity and simplicity. What Schaeffer articulated in 1970 is just as true in the 21st century: "It is a day of no small games. We need to teach a Christianity of content and purity of doctrine."⁵¹

⁵¹Schaeffer, 111.

WORKS CITED

- A-Z Hinduism; Indiaoz Hinduism—"Grace of the Bhagavad Gita."
<http://www.indiaoz.com.au/hinduism/gita/graceofgita.shtml>
- Arndt, William F. & Gingrich, Wilbur F. A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 2nd ed. rev. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979.
- The Augsburg Confession. <http://www.ctsfw.edu/etext/boc/ac/augustana02.asc>
- The Belgic Confession of Faith. http://www.pcca.org/bc_text1.html#a15
- Bhaskarananda, Swami. "Hinduism in a Nutshell—God's Grace."
<http://www.vedanta-seattle.org/pages/hinduism.html>
- Brantl, George, ed. Catholicism. New York: George Braziller, 1962.
- Catechism of the Catholic Church. Revised in Accordance with the Official Latin Text Promulgated by Pope John Paul II. New York: Doubleday, 1995.
- Catholic Encyclopedia. "Actual Grace." <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06689x.htm>
- "Sanctifying Grace." <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06701a.htm>
- Cushing, Richard J., Archbishop of Boston. Decree Regarding Leonard Feeney, April 18, 1949. <http://www.romancatholicism.org/feeney-condemnations.htm>
- Davis, Charles. God's Grace In History. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966.
- Dunstan, Leslie. Protestantism. New York: George Braziller, 1962.
- Gard, Richard A., ed. Buddhism. New York: George Braziller, 1962.
- Hanover Historical Texts Project. The Council of Trent—The Fifth Session.
<http://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/ct05.html>
- Hertzberg, Arthur, ed. Judaism. New York: George Braziller, 1962.
- Hillman, Eugene. "Evangelization in a Wider Ecumenism: Theological Grounds for Dialogue With Other Religions." *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 12/1 (Winter 1975).
- Introduction to Protestantism. "The Five Soli."
<http://protestant.christianityinview.com/solas.html>

Jewish Encyclopedia. “Divine Grace.”

http://bible.tmtm.com/wiki/GRACE%2C_DIVINE_%28Jewish_Encyclopedia%29

—— “Original Virtue.”

http://bible.tmtm.com/wiki/VIRTUE%2C_ORIGINAL_%28Jewish_Encyclopedia%29

The Koran. <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/k/koran/>

Medieval Sourcebook: Twelfth Ecumenical Council: Lateran IV 1215. “The Canons of the Fourth Lateran Council, 1215, Canon 1.”

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/lateran4.html>

Minor, Robert N. “Understanding as the First Step in an Evangelical Approach to World Religions: Some Methodological Considerations.” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 19/2 (Spring 1976).

Prasad, Ramanandad. Bhagavad-Gita: Teachings of Krishna/Hinduism On The Art Of Peaceful Living. International Gita Society. “The Fifth Track of Spiritual Journey.” <http://www.gita-society.com/?html=fifthtrack>

Saraswati, Prakashanand. Encyclopedia of Authentic Hinduism.

<http://encyclopediaofauthentichinduism.org/glossary.htm>

Schaeffer, Francis A. The Church At The End Of The 20th Century. Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970.

Song, Choan-Seng. “The Power of God’s Grace in the World of Religions.” *Ecumenical Review* 39/1 (Jan. 1987).

Spencer, H. Islam And The Gospel Of God. New Delhi: I.S.P.C.K, 1976 rep.

Television Interview of Billy Graham by Robert Schuller, May 31, 1997.

<http://www.wayoflife.org/fbns/fbns/fbns15.html>

Westminster Confession of Faith. http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/