

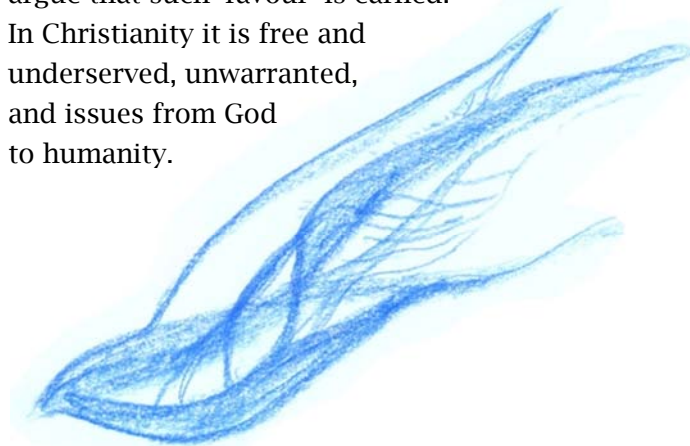
Grace

Grace is a word commonly used in churches today. Why? – And what does it mean? What is invoked when it is used. Christian Theology is a theology of grace, or it is nothing. What is the relationship between sin and grace? What is 'Prevenient Grace'? Grace is central to the Gospel yet so often it appears to be little understood by Christians.

THE UNIQUENESS OF THE GOSPEL

Douglas Gresham, C.S. Lewis's adopted son, recounted a discussion he witnessed in the Common Room of Magdalen College Oxford with his step-father. A group of academics had been discussing ardently, trying to decide what was most distinctive, exclusive, about Christianity — what made the Gospel unique? What set it apart from other religions. Clergymen in the discussion asserted this point, or that example from church history, academics tried to assert philosophical propositions, all behaved as though they were dealing with an academic subject, a topic to discuss. C.S. Lewis and Douglas Gresham entered the room; Lewis could easily understand and follow the complex philosophical points being discussed. So the question was put to Lewis — what one thing separated Christianity from all the major religions of the world? Lewis answered, *'That's easy, that's Grace.'* This one word summarizes the Gospel and two thousand years of church history. It is Grace that separates the Gospel as revelation from all other religions. C.S. Lewis continued: Grace is the free undeserved Love and forgiveness of God for humanity — this is what separates Christianity from all other faiths. No other religion precisely has this. Other religions (for example Hinduism and Islam) will argue that such 'favour' is earned.

In Christianity it is free and underserved, unwarranted, and issues from God to humanity.



GRACE

Grace in theological terms may be represented by a number of terms and categories, however, at the heart of Grace is reconciliation and atonement.



While as a noun grace can mean an elegance of movement (graceful) or of courteous good will, often represented by the graces, attractive polite behaviour and good manners, in Christian belief it is the free and unearned favour of God (as shown in some of the Old Testament Prophets), or a divinely given talent or blessing (a gift, a calling); however, in theology, Grace as this free and unearned favour of God becomes forgiveness, unearned, undeserved, unwarranted, which through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the Cross leads to reconciliation - atonement.

GRACE—DIS-GRACE

We can choose to accept or reject the Grace of God — even religious people can reject God's gracious forgiveness. We may hold out against God in our rebellion, but God still loves us in freedom, a love that requires no response yet seeks one, a love that is not conditioned, created by, or dependent upon a human response.

Humanity's answer to the Grace of God is so often Dis-Grace! That is, disgrace as a loss of reputation, the result of a dishonourable action, behaviour that is shameful and unacceptable, that issues from beliefs which have shaped a 'dis-grace-ful' character or nature. We continue to 'Fall from Grace' even as God loves us, forgives us, is crucified for us, dies to raise us up in reconciliation.

SIN AND GRACE — WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT

OFFENCE & FORGIVENESS, SIN & GRACE

Religious Emotionalism

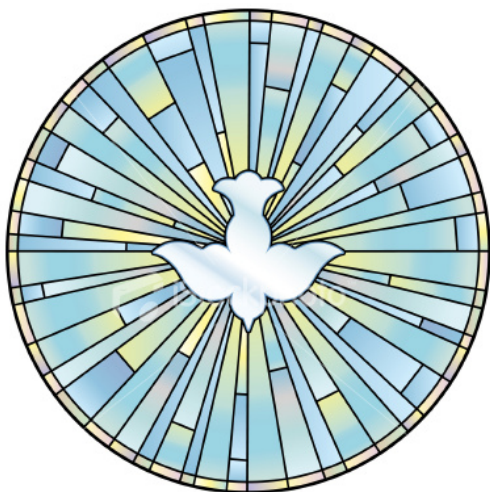
Grace is not *primarily* nice religious feelings; a moment of grace is not necessarily pietism, where we feel warm and comfortable being 'religious'. We do not have nice religious feelings of warmth, comfort, and decide that is grace. Grace is the unconditional decision by God through Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the Cross to forgive humanity — to atone. Whether we know it or not, whether we have nice religious feelings or not grace *is*, and we are forgiven.

Forgiveness From What?

Being forgiven must mean you have done something you should not have done, transgressed, trespassed. This is original sin, the Fall (Genesis 3). Transgression, trespass, requires and demands two things — forgiveness and reparation. The one who is offended against, sinned against, can forgive the trespasser; but what is the point of forgiveness if the sinner, the offender does not accept that forgiveness and thereby change his/her ways — reparation.

Sin...

What if the original trespass has so degraded the sinner that in the very depths of its soul, its psyche, its being, it is now changed and cannot stop sinning — so that all people who come after are likewise similarly afflicted? We all know how certain traits of behaviour can cease to be optional, cease to be something nice to do, and become compulsive — in a word, addictive. Original sin has infected humanity and has possessed the human like alcohol possessing one who has become an alcoholic.



Sin... & Grace

But sin is more than that. A person finds it can do something, an act or action that initially it might have regarded as repugnant, even abominable; then it finds it enjoys this act, then it realises it can no longer stop doing it, such a person then develops justification for this act, even religious theories to justify such fallen wilfulness: such an action is so often abuse, whether physically violent or sexual. Therefore sin is about the dark side of humanity, the dark side of desire and the corruption of love. Our love should be focussed on God. Self-love leads to sin and such sin is only fully unmasked in the graciousness of God's atoning sacrifice and forgiveness: to know sin we only have to look at the Cross. The ultimate sin is not caused by a

“Sin is only fully unmasked
in the graciousness of
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lack of control over our appetites. The ultimate sin is pride: *eritis sicut deus* (to be God, to act as if you were God). Pride is the attempt to be judge, to act as if one were God, to reject God's righteousness and substitute with self. Sin is therefore nihilistic and leads to the evil of nothingness. Sin is humanity trying to be its own judge, trying to decide for itself; humanity finds its unity and its determination against God in trying to find justification for itself from itself, and not from God

Grace... Overcomes Sin

Grace is a risk; God risks when confronting human sin. Humanity is nothing, we are fallen and prey to nothingness. In the giving of his Son, however, in reconciling humanity to God through Christ, God is everything so that humanity may not be nothing, but may live for God and God alone.

Judgement

Grace is given in judgement: we must face God and our sinfulness, all that our brokenness has done to our selves and to others and in that judgement we are forgiven.

Therefore Grace is the Free
Undeserved Forgiveness
of God for Humanity

THE PARABLE OF THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT

If Grace is the free undeserved forgiveness of God for humanity how should we react? How should we behave? If we fail to forgive we reject God's reconciliation. The Swiss theologian Karl Barth noted that if we reject the love of God (remembering that our actions are often more indicative of us than our intentions), if we reject God's grace then we will experience the love of God as wrath—

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.' 'For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

Matthew 18:23-35

Are all sins forgiven?

'I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin.'

Mark 3:28-29

PAGAN FORGIVENESS

If Grace is the free undeserved Love and Forgiveness of God for humanity what is the opposite? An example of human generated, self-defined — 'Pagan' — dis-grace, was portrayed in the film, *Schindler's List*. The Nazi SS officer Amon Göth (SS-Hauptsturmführer — Captain), of the Plaszów concentration camp (into which the Jews were forced) is brutal in his treatment of these God's chosen people. He shoots them randomly, for fun; any lapse in concentration or slacking at work is punishable with violence and death. The Jews are starved, crowded into filthy, vermin infested huts to live on top of each other. Oscar Schindler, who is secretly trying to save as many of the Jews as he can, comments to Amon Göth that perhaps true power is exercised in forgiveness, a pardon given when a criminal knows s/he is guilty is real power — in a word, grace. Göth therefore forgives a Jewish boy for failing to clean his bath. He then poses in front of the mirror, saying 'I pardon you, I pardon you', vainly he waves his hand like a Roman Emperor bestowing favour, looks in the mirror at himself being beneficent, magnanimous, generous and forgiving. He then changes his mind and shoots the boy, kills him at some distance, as the child walks across the concentration camp believing he is pardoned, forgiven.



Ralph Fiennes portraying the Nazi SS Officer Amon Göth in the film, *Schindler's List*

The Holocaust is perhaps an example that epitomises humanity though its own strengths trying to be God and solving any human problems for itself. It is the antithesis, it is the contradiction, it is the opposite of God's grace in Christ, it is the anti-Christ. But, we err if we believe we can put the Holocaust up as the anti-Christ and decide we are safe and sound, kind and considerate and forgiving. Humanity will always invent ethics and religions to justify whatever actions it feels comfortable with, to justify itself.

Does God go back on his turning to humanity? Does God forgive, then destroy? When humanity tries to imitate God's grace through its own efforts, humanity will always fail. So when we do genuinely forgive, and when such forgiveness costs us and gives no ground to our vanity and our lust for power, then we may ask, 'Where does such grace come from?' We cannot of our own efforts generate such gracious forgiveness, such reconciliation. Is not such grace the action of the Holy Spirit working in us prior to, generating our desire, for forgiveness?

SCRIPTURE ON GRACE & HOW WE SHOULD FORGIVE

Of the graceful, graciousness, of Jesus: *'And the grace of God was upon him'* (Luke 2:40); *'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us ... full of grace and truth'* (John 1:14); *'From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another'* (John 1:16); *'For the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.'* (John 1:17). See also—

Matthew 6:9-15 — the Lord's Prayer and explanation

Matthew 9:6 — the authority of Jesus to forgive sins

Matthew 18:21-22 — the injunction to forgive always

Mark 2:7 & 10, and **Luke 5:21-24** — evidence of, and questions raised about Jesus's authority to forgive sins, the authority of the Son of Man that echoes the authority of God

Luke 23:34 — Jesus prays from the Cross that the Father might forgive those who crucify him, for they know not what they do

Mark 11:25 and **Luke 6:37**, also **Luke 11:4** — the imperative is to forgive anyone who has anything against you, so that God may therefore forgive you; do not condemn others, lest you be condemned, forgive and be forgiven

Luke 17:3-4 — if we encounter repentance then we must forgive

John 20:23 — a warning to the churches, if they forgive people their sins they are forgiven, if the churches refuse to forgive, the sins are retained.



Graham Sutherland,
Crucifixion
above, 1946
& left, 1943

THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

The question of faith and works is preceded by grace. God initiates, we respond; God gives us talents, abilities, gifts, which we should use, with which we should be reconciled—

For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have

been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

MATT 25:14-30, NRSV

PELAGIANISM & PREVENIENT GRACE

PELAGIUS'S BOOT LACES

Pelagius (c. 354-430 AD) was a Romano-British churchman and ascetic (an austere spiritualist monk) who denied the doctrine of original sin (as developed by Augustine of Hippo) and was declared a heretic by the Church. His beliefs became known as Pelagianism. As an orator he was influential in the church. However, he was generally considered to be teaching 'novelties' about the faith that were not grounded in the teachings of Jesus and the witness of the disciples, and the apostles in the generation after the resurrection (the apostolic tradition). Essentially Pelagianism taught that individuals could achieve salvation purely by their own efforts, through works - good works. It was the Roman Catholic Church that condemned Pelagius's teachings, yet a thousand years later the Protestant Reformation criticised Rome for its emphasis on salvation through good works, through indulgences, claiming that the late medieval Roman Catholic church was Pelagian.

Pelagius's teachings are essentially a contradiction of the doctrine of original sin, formulated by Augustine and grounded in scripture (Genesis 3). Pelagianism is a theological theory named after Pelagius and is the belief that original sin did not taint human nature and that people are still capable of choosing good or evil without the influence of God, through the Holy Spirit, in the form of divine grace. The sin of Eve and Adam was merely a bad example for their descendants to follow, or not, as they chose. The action of original sin did not, according to Pelagianism, have a changing effect on the rest of humanity - the very nature of humanity was not changed, corrupted, dis-graced, by the actions of Eve and Adam. The view of Pelagianism is that Jesus is setting a good example for humanity to follow. Therefore humanity has full control and therefore full responsibility for obeying or disobeying Jesus' teachings. Grace is therefore superfluous, unnecessary.

Pelagius's beliefs have led to the comment that Pelagianism is about humanity trying to raise itself up by its own boot laces, pull itself up by its own efforts.

NEO-PELAGIANISM

There is an emphasis in many of the world's religions on merit and personal effort; for example, in militant Islam where suicide bombers earn access to dozens of virgins waiting for them in their 'heaven'. Pelagianism is widespread today. In the West, to a degree, this emphasis on good works is seen in contemporary 'spirituality' in the emphasis on self-definition and self-identification. Different groupings, lifestyles present aspects of the self, define certain modes of behaviour, as the key to fulfilment and salvation. For example, do both American heterosexual Evangelicals and British homosexual liberals define themselves by their sexual behaviour and claim that they are 'saved' because of this identity? From Freemasonry to Feminism, from Laddism to Protestant sects, indeed many religions and cults, claim that our own efforts in both works and self-definition will lead to nirvana, heaven, 'salvation'.

The key to understanding reality and the human condition is in a doctrine of original sin, the Fall. Satan put the idea into the minds of our ancestors that we could be like 'gods' (Genesis 3), that we could set up on our own, define our own happiness, our own morality. This attempt was hopeless and led merely to human history. A history characterized by, for C.S. Lewis, money and poverty, war and ambition, prostitution and sexual degradation, the class struggle, empires and slavery. Lewis takes this further. Original sin is the key to history: civilizations and cultures grow up, often founded on sound principles, good laws are formulated, but something always goes wrong: 'some fatal flaw always brings the selfish and cruel people to the top and it all slides back into misery and ruin.' (C.S. Lewis, *Broadcast Talks*, 1942, p. 49, later republished as *Mere Christianity*). For years Marxism was the ultimate neo-Pelagian pseudo-religion; in recent times both 'Thatcherism' and 'New Labour' have been defined by apparent universal good, the ultimate political system and blessing for all humanity, only to descend into selfishness, greed and death.

ORIGINAL SIN & PREVENIENT GRACE

Augustine defined original sin as an act of foolishness (*insipientia*), pride and disobedience to God. The first couple - Eve, then Adam - disobeyed God, who had told them not to eat of the symbolic tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:17). The tree for Augustine was a symbol of the order of creation. Self-centeredness made Adam and Eve eat of it, thus failing to acknowledge and respect the world as it was created by God; all human efforts afterwards were likewise defined by selfishness therefore humanity cannot save itself, humanity cannot pull itself up by its bootlaces, all decision from its own efforts will be tainted. This rebellion is the root of evil (*radix mali*) and it originates in personified evil. The only answer is in prevenient grace.

Prevenient grace is the grace of God which comes before any good in the human; prevenient (*preceding, prior*) grace predisposes the human heart to seek God *prior* to any initiative on the part of the human. Any good we can do does not come from our own strengths, our own initiative, but is God the Holy Spirit working in and through us *prior* to any efforts of our own initiative. Prevenient grace issues from the decision by God, the free unwarranted grace that forgives humanity, which then, through the Holy Spirit, raises up humanity. We cannot achieve this for ourselves but God can achieve good through us.

Grace Initiates, Works Respond



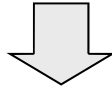
SIN & GRACE, REPENTANCE & ATONEMENT: PROCESSION



GOD THE ETERNAL TRINITY

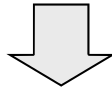
GOD THE FATHER THROUGH THE SON CREATES IN FREEDOM

Humanity is created in the image of God (the *imago dei*). Humanity created in freedom rebels, 'Falls from Grace', through a free will decision. This is not just a case of legalism — humanity is changed, corrupted, as a result. The very nature of humanity is distorted, altered; sin malforms, sin changes — we are dis-graced.



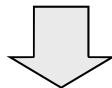
INCARNATION: GOD THE SON INITIATES

God in Christ descends in and through the Incarnation to die on the Cross, to take the sin, the trespass, onto himself as God, and through the Resurrection to raise humanity up: this is atonement. There are many moments of grace as a free will decision by God in salvation history — the Old Testament — which lead to the moment of Incarnation.



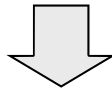
GRACE: GOD THE SON INITIATES

Through the Cross the trespass and the need for punishment is removed and reconciliation is achieved. Humanity is changed by the one spotless sacrifice — God in Christ overcomes the corruption and conquers death — Christ is the victor (*christus victor*).



THE HOLY SPIRIT INITIATES

Through the Holy Spirit, Grace (the free undeserved love and forgiveness of God for humanity) is imparted to humanity; sin is forgiven, therefore each and every person now has the opportunity to repent of the corruption in his/her life



CHRIST THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT INITIATES

Through the Holy Spirit, Grace (the freely given empowerment of and by the Holy Spirit) is imparted, given *preveniently*, which generates repentance in the individual and in communities. This prior action by the Holy Spirit leads humanity to be drawn up by Christ, to return to God

Humanity falls. But, through the Grace of God, is drawn back up again into the divine life
The key response to Christ's atoning sacrifice is repentance (Gk: μετάνοια — *metanoia* — soul searching, scouring repentance, shrunken penitence). True repentance cannot issue from the corrupted human. Only through the prior act of grace (*prevenient grace*) by God can the human truly repent and accept this re-creation generated by the Holy Spirit—

'Spirit of the living God,
Fall afresh on me.'

'Spirit of the living God,
Fall afresh on me.'

'Break me, melt me,
mould me, fill me.'

'Spirit of the living God,
Fall afresh on me.'

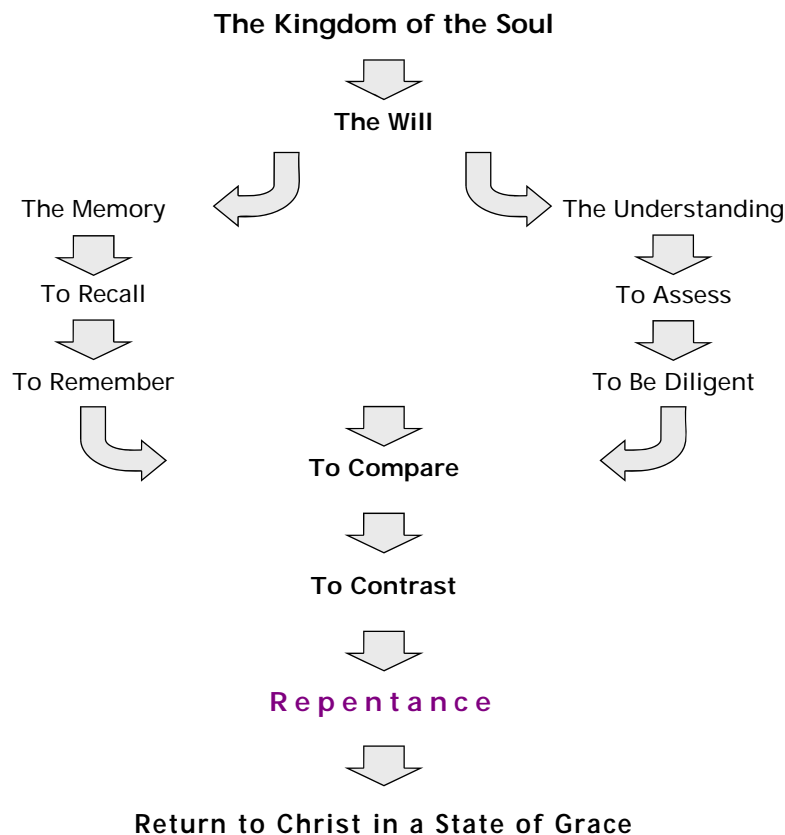


David Iverson

PROCESSION & THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

TWO-FOLD GRACE

If grace is the free unwarranted forgiveness of God for humanity, and if this grace is *primarily* exhibited in the procession of God to save humanity, descending (Incarnation), crucified (the Cross, to atone), to be raised-up (Resurrection) - Christ drawing humanity with him into the divine life — then grace is also, *secondarily*, the work of the Holy Spirit in changing us, re-birthing us (John 3), recreating us, restoring the *imago dei* (the image of God) in us.



This diagram is based on an understanding of how grace, as the work of the Holy Spirit, acting preveniently, draws the human back to Christ.

This understanding is from Rogelio Garcia Mateo SJ, 'God Nowadays', in, *The Way*, Vol 44, No. 1, and as such is derived from the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius of Loyola.

'Only the Spirit of the Risen Christ understands that Christ is Divine, the human expression of the Father.'

'Only the Spirit of "God-made-Man" makes it possible for anyone to live with the Risen Christ, to know and love him as he really is: Divine, but human like us.'

Fr McGowan SJ, formerly Priest at the Sacred Heart Church, Wimbledon