

Grace

Some years ago a word that had served the church faithfully since the time of Jesus grew restless and started running with the wrong crowd. The change was so gradual most people didn't notice, until her whole persona had changed.

The response was predictable: who's to blame? Some said the church was too strict with its words; that she had to run away to experience life on her own. Others said, "If anything, the church has been too lax with its words, letting just anybody use them. No discipline!"

The word's name was 'Grace,' and she began showing up in all kinds of places:

- A Society Editor for a metropolitan newspaper was reporting on a debutant ball and said of one of the young women, "She had 'grace'."
- A TV sportscaster said of a pro basketball player, "He moves with 'grace'."
- A political candidate was said to accept defeat with "grace".
- A young starlet married an 88-year-old man and said she was attracted to his "grace." [At last report he had 140 million "grace."]

Grace no longer was the church's word; she now belonged to the world.

The Elders met to discuss what to do about Grace. Some felt it was time to disown her; after all, once a word's been out running the streets a while, it's never the same. Besides, the church has more than enough words for every occasion.

Others said, "No, we need to accept her, just as she is. Times change, and we have to accept the inevitable. Maybe with her new identity she can reach some of the young people." The parable of Prodigal Son was mentioned: "After all, the church is in the forgiveness business."

A few wanted to take her back, but only after rehabilitation—maybe a twelve-step program. With such a divergence of opinion, a study committee was appointed and instructed to report back in a month.

Some church members were waiting outside the meeting room. After all, "Grace" had always been such a beautiful word—the apple of everybody's eye. Nobody wanted to disown her—or even to rehabilitate her. Oh, some mumbled about "hiding our heads in the sand." Some said "Grace" had become cheap...

In the end, nothing was done. "Grace" was just everyone's favorite word—so sweet. One of the elders gave the CWF President some money and told her to take "Grace" to the beauty shop—get her cleaned up; buy her a new dress.

But "Grace" still was restless. She felt she was being taken for granted (and she was.) And there was confusion about who she really was. In her absence the church had

talked one of her cousins into taking her place. She looked a lot like "Grace", and the church dressed her up like "Grace". Some people even started calling her "Grace." But her real name was "Permissiveness," and she just didn't have the strength of "Grace."

Still, a lot of the people preferred "Permissiveness" over "Grace" because she was "low maintenance," and there was so much confusion over the difference between them that the church lost much of its power to change lives and make a difference.

I am one who favors reclaiming the word. For one thing, it's a New Testament word. But beyond that, there's simply no substitute for "Grace."

In permissiveness, something is overlooked; in grace, something is overcome—transformed. Grace occurs in spite of alienation and division. Henry David Thoreau said most men live lives of "quiet desperation." Grace transforms quiet desperation into bold determination; fate into meaningful destiny; guilt into confidence and courage. There's something triumphant in the word, Grace.

In Romans 5 Paul describes the unimaginable power of separation and self-destruction that consumes society and overwhelms the individual soul. He names that separation "Sin." Then comes the transition:

(ROMANS 5:20-6:5 NSV) *But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, ²¹so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. ^{6:1}What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? ²By no means! How can we who* *died to sin go on living in it? ³Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. ⁵For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.*

"Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more." This is Paul's autobiography: it describes the most overwhelming, decisive experience in *his* life. He was struck by Grace, and he was changed! Note: Paul didn't change. Paul was changed!

Do you know what it means to be struck by Grace? It doesn't mean we suddenly believe God exists or Jesus is the Christ. James writes, "Even the devils believe, and tremble" (2:19). Belief *alone* puts us at the same level as the demons.

Nor does Grace mean we're making progress toward moral self-control. Moral progress may *result* from Grace; but in fact it may prevent us from receiving Grace if it leads to pride and self-assurance. Remember the Pharisees?

We cannot transform our lives. We can only allow them to be transformed by that stroke of Grace. And nothing is demanded of grace; no religious or moral or intellectual prerequisites—nothing but surrender. That's hard to accept when we've been told all our lives, "You don't get something for nothing."

Phillip Yancey, in *Rumors of Another World*, writes: "Grace is irrational, unfair, unjust, and makes sense only if I believe in ... a merciful God who always offers another chance. When the world sees grace in action, it falls silent."

Nelson Mandela taught the world a lesson in grace. Released after twenty-seven years in prison, he was elected president of South Africa. He asked his jailer to join him on the inauguration platform. He appointed Archbishop Desmond Tutu to head an official government panel with a daunting name, the "Truth and Reconciliation Commission".

Mandela sought to defuse the pattern of revenge he'd seen so often when an oppressed people took control over their oppressors. For the next two-and-a-half years the Commission heard reports of atrocities. The rules were simple: if a white official voluntarily faced his accusers, confessed his crime, and fully acknowledged his guilt, he could not be tried and punished for that crime. Hard-liners grumbled over the obvious injustice of letting criminals go free; but Mandela insisted that the country needed healing more than it needed justice.

A policeman named van de Broek confessed to shooting an eighteen-year-old boy and burning his body, turning it on a spit like barbecue meat in order to destroy the evidence. Eight years later he returned to the same house and seized the boy's father. The wife was forced to watch as they bound her husband on a woodpile, poured gasoline over his body, and burned him alive.

There was a hush as the elderly widow took the stand to respond. "What do you want from Mr. van de Broek?" the judge asked. She said she wanted him to go to the place where they burned her husband's body and gather up the dust so she could give him a decent burial.

Then she said, "Mr. van de Broek took my family away from me, and I still have a lot of love to give. Twice a month I would like him to come to the ghetto and spend a day with me so I can be a mother to him. And I would like Mr. van de Broek to know that he is forgiven by God, and that I forgive him too. I would like to embrace him so he can know my forgiveness is real."

Someone began to sing "Amazing Grace" as she made her way to the witness stand, but van de Broek didn't hear the hymn. He'd fainted.

Justice was not done in South Africa that day. Something beyond justice took place. "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good," said Paul.

Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu understood that when evil is done, only one response can overcome the evil. Revenge perpetuates the evil. Retributive Justice punishes it. But evil is overcome only by good; only if the injured party absorbs it, and refuses to allow it to go any further. And that's the pattern of otherworldly grace that Jesus demonstrated on the cross. And that's why Grace is so amazing!