



Grace, but

Oh sure, we have been saved by grace, but... I've heard that line so many times I wondered if I could find an authoritative religious resource that believes *grace, but* to actually be one word. Some folks do not seem comfortable simply using the word grace—it has to be immediately qualified by the word “but,” preferably with little pause between the two words. Grace alone, without some religious proviso or humanly-imposed limitation, somehow makes religious folks uneasy.

I consulted my desk edition of the *Keeping Grace Under Control New World Dictionary*. This dubious resource lists *grace, but* as one word, and gives this definition: “A term that introduces ideas to be used to diminish or devalue the grace explained in the New Testament.”

OK—part of what I've just said is fiction, but part is fact. Fiction—there is no such book as *Keeping Grace Under Control New World Dictionary*. Fact—even though there is no such title, there are other sources with less blatant titles that have the same objective. Fact—religion at large opposes God's grace and often turns itself into theological pretzels attempting to suppress or demonize it. Fact—*grace, but* is a widely-used term, especially when religious legalism encounters any detailed explanation of God's amazing grace.

Not long ago I received an email message from an old friend who is a pastor. He hadn't yet read my book, *Bad News Religion*, so I sent him a copy. We exchanged some thoughts about God's grace, and we mutually agreed that I would schedule a trip to speak to his congregation.

A number of weeks went by—with my anticipated trip at least six months away—and then I heard from him again. He had comments which were couched as questions, but they were really objections—objections to my book, and the “extreme” way I understand God's grace. He said that he and his church certainly believed that we are saved by *grace, but* they believed that there are rewards

in heaven for those who are more diligent here on earth.

Saved by Grace, Rewarded by Works?

This was a serious discussion, so I didn't ask him (though you can bet I wanted to!) if he had been a contributing writer for the *Keeping Grace Under Control New World Dictionary*. I did remind him that since the Bible clearly teaches us that we are saved by grace, and since the Bible also teaches that all good deeds that we perform and accomplish as Christians are produced in and through us by Jesus Christ who lives in us, then any rewards that we might be given in heaven, rewards that are over and beyond mere salvation, those rewards also must be credited to God's grace. After all, how would God contradict himself and save us by grace, but reward us by works?

But my pastor friend insisted that heavenly rewards are based on earthly deeds and presented some far-fetched illustrations. He proposed that Christians who are perfectly faithful (I'll come back to “perfectly faithful”) to their spouses will be given a higher eternal reward than Christians who “might” (his word) be saved, but were less than faithful. If God does not offer such rewards, he reasoned, why on earth (pun intended) would people want to be faithful to their spouses?

I respectfully told him that his theology had gone to the dogs. My pastor friend seemed to be suggesting that God conditions humans somewhat like Pavlov's dogs. Remember? Ivan Pavlov conducted a hallmark study in the 20th century, a study that is now known as Pavlovian conditioning. The study proved that dogs can become conditioned to have expectations based on previous experiences. An anticipated reward stimulates behavior, and dogs will perform in order to receive favorable consequences.

But, according to my Bible, we humans are not dogs (and this is just one of those pearls of wisdom you will gain from listening to me!). Our relationship with God is not gov-

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erned by the promise of rewards based on our obedience. Instead, we humans are created by God in God's own image. We are created for a relationship with God in a way that no other part of his creation is (including man's best friend).

We are created with a desire to know God, and to be known of him. God, for his part, as the Bible reveals, relentlessly and unconditionally pursues us with his love. He gives us eternity because of his goodness, not because of deeds we perform or promise to perform. God never gives up on us, he is always there for us, no matter how objectionable our behavior might be. Our relationship with God is not based on our conditioning, it is based on God's unconditional grace.

Imperfect humans are unable to perfectly commit, promise and love. Our heavenly Father is able to love without condition. There is nothing conditional about God. He does not react to us on the basis of our performance. We do not improve our standing nor do we lose standing with God purely on the basis of what we do.

Let's revisit the term "perfectly faithful" as it relates to marriage. Let's recall what Jesus taught in Matthew 5:27-28: "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Yet in the last verse of the same chapter (vs. 48) Jesus teaches, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Unconditional love cannot be produced humanly. Instructing us to be perfect (Matthew 5:48), Jesus is not proposing some humanly unattainable standard. He is saying that God demands perfection, but that we are not humanly capable of producing it. The good news is that although we are incapable of producing what God wants—God will pronounce us spiritually perfect through Christ, because of him and his perfect, atoning work on the cross which God credits to us.

Back to the exchange of emails. My friend fired back in his next email. He thought he had trapped me. "Oh,

you believe we will be saved, regardless—that everyone will be saved, no matter what they do. You must believe in universalism." I told him that he appeared to be grasping at straws, attempting to either disparage me or my "extreme" understanding of God's grace, or both. No, I do not believe everyone will be saved, regardless. I do not subscribe to the unbiblical ideas of universalism.

What We Must Do

In order to be saved we must do something. We must repent, we must surrender any and all notions that anything that we produce or perform can add to what God gives us by his grace. We must completely, without reservation, believe that Jesus Christ is sufficient to save us. His work on the cross is enough—he doesn't need our help. Once we are saved we cannot lose our salvation. We could, if it were up to us. But that's why the gospel is good news—it isn't up to us! Thank God!

I could see that we weren't getting anywhere with these emails, and that the real issue my friend was struggling with was my scheduled visit to speak to his church. He seemed concerned about how much trouble I might cause with my "extreme" understanding of God's grace. So in the next email I simply told him I don't have much time to travel and that canceling my visit to his church would not be a problem for me. His response was immediate, and I could almost feel his sigh of relief emanating from my computer screen.

I haven't heard from him since our last online talk about *grace, but*. He was relieved that his congregation would be spared a discussion of *grace without the but*.

Grace alone. Grace without the but. That's what *Christianity Without the Religion* is all about. Grace, and nothing but. No ifs, ands or buts. Grace. Say the word, without any qualification. Ponder it, without the limitations religion attempts to impose. Grace alone. Don't muddle up what God makes clear. Forget about *grace, but*. Let's get our buts out of the way. □

—Greg Albrecht

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