

## Grace

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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 a figure skater "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 should 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. 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:

<p><b>ROMANS 5:12-18 (NRSV)</b> <i>Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned- ... <sup>17</sup>If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will</i></p>	<p><i>those who receive the abundance of <u>grace</u> and <u>grace</u> of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. <sup>18</sup>Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.</i></p>
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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!

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."

Tony Campolo was in one of those greasy spoon cafés late one night. He says, "As I sat there munching my donut and sipping my coffee at 3:30 AM, the door of the diner suddenly swung open and, to my discomfort, in marched eight or nine provocative and boisterous prostitutes.

It was a small place, and they sat on either side of me. They were loud and crude, and I felt completely out of place. I was just about to make my getaway when the woman beside me said, "Tomorrow's my birthday."

Her "friend" responded in a nasty tone, "So what do you want from me? A birthday party? Ya want me to get you a cake and sing 'Happy Birthday'?"

"Come on," said the woman sitting next to me. "Why do you have to be so

mean? I was just telling you. I mean, why should you give me a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"

Tony says, "When I heard that, I made a decision. I waited until they left, then called to the fat guy behind the counter—Harry was his name: 'Do they come in here every night?'

'Yeah!' he answered. 'Why d'ya wanta know?'

"Because I heard her say tomorrow's her birthday," I said. "What do you think about us throwing a birthday party for her—right here—tomorrow night?"

A smile crossed his chubby cheeks, and he said, "That's great! I like it!" Calling to his wife, who did the cooking in the back room, he shouted, "Hey! Come out here! This guy's got a great idea. Tomorrow's Agnes's birthday. This guy wants us to go in with him and throw a birthday party for her—right here—tomorrow night!"

His wife was all bright and smiley. She said, "That's wonderful! You know Agnes is one of those people who's really nice and kind, and nobody does anything nice and kind for her. I'll make a cake." So they made plans.

At 2:30 the next morning, Tony was back at the diner with crepe-paper decorations, and soon had the place looking good. Word had gotten out; because by 3:15 the place was packed. Tony said, "Wall-to-wall prostitutes. And me."

At 3:30 on the dot, the door of the diner swung open, and in came Agnes and her friend, and we all screamed, "Happy birthday!"

Never have I seen a person so flabbergasted. Her mouth fell open. Her legs seemed to buckle. Her friend grabbed her arm to steady her. She sat at the counter, and we all sang "Happy Birthday" to her. When the birthday cake with all the candles on it was carried out, she just lost it and openly cried.

Finally, she looked down at the cake and, without taking her eyes off it, she slowly and softly said, "Look, Harry, is it all right with you if I keep the cake a little while? I mean, is it all right if we don't eat it right away?"

Harry shrugged and answered, "Sure! It's O.K. If you want to keep the cake, keep the cake. Take it home, if you want to."

"Can I?" she asked. Then, looking at me, she said, "I live just a few doors down the street. I want to take the cake home, okay? I'll be right back. Honest!"

She got off the stool, and carrying the cake like it was the Holy Grail, walked slowly toward the door. When the door closed, there was a stunned silence in the place. Not knowing what else to do, Tony said, "How about if we pray?"

He said, "Looking back on it now, it seems more than strange for a sociologist

to be leading a prayer meeting with a bunch of prostitutes in a diner at 3:30 in the morning. But then it just felt like the right thing to do. I prayed for Agnes. I prayed for her salvation. I prayed that her life would be changed and that God would be good to her.

When I finished, Harry leaned over the counter and with a trace of hostility in his voice, he said, "Hey! You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?" In one of those moments when just the right words came, I answered, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning."

Harry waited a moment and then almost sneered as he answered, "No you don't. There's no church like that. If there was, I'd join a church like that!"

Phillip Yancey shares a story told to him by a friend who serves the impoverished and addicted in the Windy City. Yancey's friend said:

"A prostitute came to me homeless, sick, unable to buy food for her two-year-old daughter. Through sobs and tears, she told me she had been renting out her daughter - *two years old!* - to men interested in kinky sex. She made more renting out her daughter for an hour than she could earn on her own in a night. She had to do it, she said, to support her own drug habit. I could hardly bear hearing her sordid story. For one thing, it made me legally liable - I'm required to report cases of child abuse. I had no idea what to say to this woman.

"At last I asked if she had ever thought of going to church for help. I'll never forget the look of pure shock on her face. 'Church!' she cried. 'Why would I ever go there? I already feel terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse.'"

In which story do you see grace? Sinners and vagabonds flocked to Jesus, not away from Him. My heart aches when, time after time, the hurting and helpless try to steer clear of His followers.

In *Rumors of Another World*, Yancey 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."