

ONLY BY GRACE

The one successful path to character development

BY STUART TYNER

MY WORKSHOP SESSION at a union-wide ministries convention had just begun when, out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of a silver mini-recorder clutched in the hand of a middle-aged man with a suit as serious as his frown. From its place on the front row of the room, the tape recorder followed my movements back and forth, making sure to capture every word I said.

At first, I was flattered. *I must be saying something memorable*, I thought, trying not to lose my focus. So I continued presenting my assigned topic, trying to make it clear that the fundamental core of everything we Adventists are and do and believe stems from the everlasting gospel of God's unrelenting, saving grace—the one “great truth around which all other truths cluster,”¹ according to Ellen White.

But as soon as the session concluded, the real purpose of the recording became clear. Interrupting someone who was asking a question, the man jumped to his feet and began shouting at me.

“You have a hidden agenda,” he announced at the top of his voice. “You are trying to destroy the standards of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and . . .” he paused and brandished the little silver tape recorder, “I have the proof right here!”

Some compliment! I thought he was finding inspiration in the discussion of the wonder of God's enduring love. Instead, like Paul's imaginary questioner in Romans 3:31, he was hearing only a nullifying message—a making void of the law through faith.

Can Grace and Character Development Coexist?

Is it possible to celebrate the freedom of grace without giving anybody the wrong idea? Can we discuss the need for Christians to grow without making grace-oriented people nervous? Can we establish a grace orientation in our classrooms and still build Christian character? Can these two fundamental emphases of Christianity—an appreciation for everything God has done for us in Jesus, and a call to become more and more Christlike—successfully coexist?

Or does emphasizing one necessarily destroy the other? If we teach our students to appreciate the fullness of God's grace, are we thereby undermining their determination to obey? If we teach them to obey, are we running the terrible risk of destroying their dependence on God's grace?

If you listen to the concerns of many in our church family today, you could easily conclude that

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the gospel of God's saving grace inevitably weakens Christian commitment and leads to the abandonment of biblical ideals. "Doesn't the research indicate that the higher your grace orientation, the lower your standards?" one church leader asked me recently, incorrectly interpreting a finding of the Valuegenesis research. "Grace lessens one's commitment to obedience," a pastor insisted, protesting something I had said in a sermon. "Don't we confuse our students," a teacher queried, "by saying that God loves them unconditionally and then telling them they had better be good?"

Not long ago, I received by E-mail an impassioned review of a new book that

one Adventist Book Center manager had decided to carry in his store. The book was about another Sabbathkeeping denomination that had "suddenly discovered grace," which was why, the author concluded, its members had quit keeping the seventh-day Sabbath, abandoned their high standards, and started eating lobster! The concern of the ABC manager was unmistakable: Take this as a warning, all you who preach grace—the Sabbath is about to mean less to you, and your diet is about to change.

The Foundation of Spiritual Growth

But when we listen to the way Ellen White talks about the connection between

grace and the transformation of the human heart, we come to a very different conclusion.

- "Nothing but the grace of God can convict and convert the heart."²
- "It is the grace of Christ alone, through faith, that can make us holy."³
- "The gospel of His grace alone can cure the evils that curse society."⁴
- "God's grace alone can work a reformation."⁵
- "It is the matchless grace of God alone that will triumph over the rebellion of the heart."⁶
- "It is His grace that gives man power to obey the laws of God. It is this that enables him to break the bondage of evil

habit.”⁷

- “His matchless grace *alone* can save our feet from falling.”⁸

Clearly, it is God’s saving grace, and *nothing else*, that penetrates the stubborn casing of our rebellious, resistant heart and transforms us! It is grace that makes us desire grace. It is grace that makes us want to grow in Jesus (2 Peter 3:18).

Whatever biblical picture we choose to describe it, the cause and the effect are always the same:

- *It is because we are not condemned* that we go and sin no more (John 8:11).

- *It is because we have seen the Light* that we refuse to walk in darkness (John 8:12).

- *It is because we were bought with a price* that we desire to honor God with our body (1 Corinthians 6:20).

- *It is because we have been reconciled* that we continue in our faith (Colossians 1:19-23).

- *It is because our debt has been canceled* that we behave properly (Luke 7:43).

The principle is universal, even when stated in the negative: “He who has been forgiven little loves little” (Luke 7:47, NIV).⁹

Do You Want to Be Successful?

Do you really want your character-building efforts to be successful? Do you truly want your students to become Christlike? If so, there is *only one way* to ensure success—through *growing in grace*. Only within a central grace orientation will character-building efforts produce the results we want.

Do you remember the film we used to show during the first few nights of stop-smoking seminars? It was called *One in 20,000*, a well-made drama-documentary about the physical consequences of smoking. In vivid color, viewers participated in the surgical removal of a cancerous lung from a lifelong smoker. Starting with the first sharp incisions of the scalpel, all the way to the final sutures at the end of the operation, we saw it all. When the lights came on after that film, *nobody* rushed out of the building to light up. They went straight to the trash cans to deposit their half-used packs of cigarettes, doing so with the sincere intention never to smoke again. The surgeon’s scalpel had scared

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the smoke right out of them. Character building had begun in earnest!

Unfortunately, fear is not a lasting motivator. A picture of a cancerous lung is not strong enough to tear a powerful addiction from a smoker’s body. Many of those well-intentioned smokers, despite the graphic reminder of the disastrous physical consequences of their intemperance still throbbing in their memories, went right back to their habit as soon as the fear wore thin. Smoking, like all bad habits, can be truly overcome only within the security of God’s all-encompassing grace. That’s why attendees at every Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings take their first step toward recovery by admitting that there has to be a power stronger than themselves.

Let’s examine four principles of grace-full and effective character building to see if we can talk about God’s grace and the transformation of our characters *at the same time* without frightening anyone, regardless of philosophy.

Principle No. 1: Start With Jesus

Here’s the way Jesus Himself stated the principle: “As I am lifted up from the earth, I will attract everyone to me” (John 12:32, *The Message*).¹⁰ The more we talk about Jesus, the more we sing about His amazing grace, the more we model our ministry after His, the more our students will be attracted to Him. The more they learn about Jesus, the more they will ap-

preciate the gospel of God’s grace (Acts 20:24), the good news of God’s full acceptance of us in Jesus (Acts 15:8-11), His continuing faithfulness (Psalm 100:3-5), and His loving kindness (Titus 3:3-7). And the more they are attracted to the beauty of the character of Jesus, the more they will desire to be changed into His likeness. Paul states the principle concisely and unequivocally: “God’s kindness leads you toward repentance” (Romans 2:4). “Those who seek to correct others should present the attractions of Jesus,” Ellen White counsels us. “Talk of Christ, and when the heart is converted, everything that is out of harmony with the Word of God will drop off.”¹¹

Too often, however, many of us begin with a desire to correct an objectionable trait of character, work on the flaw until our students get it right, and then decide that the reborn child is “safe to save,” or at least to introduce to Jesus. This is, of course, exactly backwards from what we ought to do. Sometimes, we may “tack on” some grace by adding a question like “What would Jesus do?” to our discussion, or by asking how to find grace in a specific standard or value.

But it’s not enough to ask, “Where is grace?” in a particular topic. Grace is not a minor subset of a standard. It’s not character-building activity, or a last-minute addendum to our instruction. Grace is the “great truth around which all other truths cluster. In order to be rightly

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understood and appreciated, every truth in the word of God, from Genesis to Revelation, must be studied in the light that streams from the cross of Calvary.”¹² It is grace that gives meaning and purpose to character building, not character building that illuminates grace.

Principle No. 2: Separate Spiritual Growth from Entrance Requirements for Heaven

Don't turn the exciting possibilities of becoming more like Jesus into a discouraging process in which your students feel threatened with not making it into heaven. The Bible Belt bumper sticker sermon, “Turn or Burn,” is *not* the message we're trying to convey.

Adventist students, in particular, seem to have a difficult time in separating even the most mundane regulations of an educational institution from the entrance requirements for heaven. If a church school makes a rule, they mistakenly reason, then the appropriate behavior must get you into heaven. Not long ago, I talked to two young men who had been expelled from an academy for refusing to stop wearing their baseball caps backwards. As they shared their experience with me, it became clear that, while they knew they had been unnecessarily stubborn, they were confused about why *God* cared about how they wore their caps. They actually thought *God* had declared that wearing a baseball cap with the bill pointing forward was more *Christian* than wearing it with the bill aimed in the other direction. They could not understand that this was simply a local application of a non-sacred dress code agreed upon by at least a majority of a particular faculty group, and that there was nothing at all

spiritual about it. The boys felt that if they didn't conform to *God's* regulation, the church didn't want them and they wouldn't go to heaven. No wonder they were confused.

We need to be as clear on this point as we possibly can be. We grow in Jesus *because* we are His children, not in order to *become* His children (1 John 3:2). We behave with propriety so that people will glorify God (Matthew 5:16), not so that we can convince God to love us. Our characters need to be developed so that we can honor God, not so that we can earn our way into heaven. It is grace that inspires us to grow, not growth that purchases grace or favor.

“Discipleship,” Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminded us, “is merely the life that springs from grace.”¹³

Principle No. 3: Keep Growing

Growing in Jesus is indeed the work of a lifetime. We all start at different points and grow at different rates. And we all need to keep growing. *None* of us has a character that is perfectly Christlike. In fact, the closer anyone comes to Jesus, “the more faulty you will appear in your own eyes; for your vision will be clearer, and your imperfections will be seen in broad and distinct contrast to His perfect nature.”¹⁴

But the fact that we need to keep growing should not be a reason for discouragement. “Do not draw back in despair,” Ellen White pleads. “We shall often have to bow down and weep at the feet of Jesus because of our shortcomings and mistakes, but we are not to be discouraged. Even if we are overcome by the enemy, we are not cast off, not forsaken and rejected of God.”¹⁵ We find the

courage to keep growing and the grace that keeps us committed to growth within the family of faith.

Use illustrations from nature to demonstrate the importance of growing. (What do you call a Giant Sequoia that stops growing? A Stunted Sequoia?) Plant a few vegetables in a window box and keep track of the daily growth. Talk about puppies and kittens, ugly ducklings and lion cubs. Watch a caterpillar turn into a delicate work of art.

Examine the lives of the people of the Bible and see the ever-present reality of growth. Abraham learns that God has the power to keep His promises (Romans 4:21). David realizes he needs to repent (Psalm 51). Jonah finds out how important it is to follow God's directions. The prodigal son returns to his father. Mary discovers the power of forgiveness. Martha learns to sit at Jesus' feet. Peter struggles with commitment. Saul becomes Paul. The “great cloud of witnesses” fills every sacred page.

Principle No. 4: Stay in the Center

Finally, don't be surprised when you get criticism about your efforts. Because of the extra intensity of the work of character development, the wide variety of challenges inherent in such endeavors, and especially because of the legalistic “baggage” many church members bring to the topic, there's a great likelihood that your work will not be fully understood or appreciated. When confrontations occur, stay in the center of the debate. Hold to the high calling to be Christlike and to the necessity of proceeding within a grace orientation.

I'm always troubled by a call for “balance,” which indicates that *legalism* is at

one inappropriate end of the pendulum swing and *grace* is at the other. It's true that when the pendulum swings too far to the right, we end up overemphasizing *our* character, *our* obedience, *our* spirituality, *our* response, and *our* works. And it's equally true that such an emphasis ends up being dry, unproductive, and unsatisfying.

But the other end of the pendulum swing is permissiveness, antinomianism, and lawlessness, *not grace*. In actuality, grace is the *center* position in our faith, the *core* to which both the extremes of legalism and lawlessness need to return. Grace is at the heart of the church doctrine that came out of the Reformation, "the central teaching of the Christian faith"¹⁶ and of Adventist theology.

Our Most Desperate Need

We had just concluded a youth ministry training event in a city in the southwest United States when a local church youth leader handed me a negative evaluation of the weekend.

"What didn't you like?" I asked him, hoping for a suggestion to improve the training.

"It was that moment during church when you asked us to stand up and clap to the song," he responded. "It was all downhill from there." Actually, his response was just the tip of the iceberg. The next few minutes revealed a deep-seated distrust of praise music and a dislike of the general directions he saw youth ministry taking. "Clapping is just the symptom," he said. "I'm teaching my youth that applause has no place in church."

When he paused long enough for me to cut in, I asked him what would happen if the kids in his youth group came across the psalm that invited us to clap our hands and shout unto God with the voice of triumph (Psalm 47)? His answer astounded me.

"David didn't know everything there is to know about worship," he declared.

Well, in a way, the youth leader was right. None of us knows everything about *anything*. Certainly, David wouldn't have claimed omniscience. But the youth leader was setting himself up as the final authority on what was right and wrong, even if that meant declaring that the Bible had made a mistake. There are a lot of people

out there just like him, people who seem to know exactly what's right and what's wrong. Often it's *their* understanding and *their* character that's right—and it's *your* understanding that's wrong. How much better if we could all agree to keep learning together. Someday, we'll all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. Until then, however, our most desperate need is to grow more and more like Jesus, and to accomplish that growth in grace. ☞

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