

PUTTING  
AMAZING  
BACK INTO  
GRACE

Embracing the Heart of the Gospel

— REVISED AND UPDATED EDITION —

**MICHAEL HORTON**



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# Introduction

## *Welcome to the Reformation*

If you are a thinking Christian who is weary of the spiritual hamster wheel of endless “principles for living,” or if your heart can no longer embrace what your mind regards as superficiality and religious hype, you may be ready for the theology of the Reformation. Many Christians today are experiencing frustrations similar to those which eventually surfaced in the Reformation of the sixteenth century. With a renewed and growing interest among the laity in the doctrines of grace, there is no time like the present for taking this journey.

It’s kind of like a plane bound for Honolulu. For some it’s a routine business trip (as though any trip to Hawaii could be routine); for others it may be a honeymoon. But whatever experience you have had with that robust, down-to-earth faith, this brief survey can serve as a guide.

In 1517 a stocky Bible professor and monk nailed a set of propositions to a church door (the community bulletin board) for academic debate. Little did he know on that chilly autumn afternoon that it would be the masses rather than the academics who would spread what would be known as the Protestant Reformation. The monk’s name, of course, was Martin Luther.

The core of Luther’s concern was the selling of indulgences. When the pope got into a bit of a financial bind with the building of Christendom’s largest cathedral, St. Peter’s in Rome, he offered Christians

pardons for sins committed in exchange for a contribution to the construction fund. Nobody in the empire was as clever or as crass in this enterprise as the Dominican preacher John Tetzel. It is said that his traveling quartet even sang, “When the coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs.” Others composed their own version: “When the coin rings in the pitcher, the pope gets all the richer.” This type of humor should sound familiar to those of us who recall parodies of television evangelists on *Saturday Night Live* and lines from such musicians as Huey Lewis, who sings about a fat man selling salvation in his hand, and Ray Stevens, who quips, “They sell you salvation while they sing ‘Amazing Grace.’”

However, at that early point Luther had just discovered the tip of the iceberg. As he poured himself into his lectures on the Psalms, Romans, and Galatians at the University of Wittenberg, he deepened in his understanding of the Scriptures’ central message. Tetzel’s crude salvation-selling campaign was just a symptom of a broader and deeper corruption of the medieval church in its faith and practice.

Those who followed the Reformation were called “evangelicals,” taken from the Greek word *evangelion*, meaning “gospel.” Believing the gospel had been actually recovered was a radical point of view, but those who used the term believed that to be the case. It was not that there were no Christians and churches, or even bishops and archbishops, who did not believe the *evangel*. Many throughout the Middle Ages did their utmost to restore the gospel to its biblical purity. For instance, Luther’s own mentor, the head of his monastic order over all of Germany, taught salvation by grace and many of the other truths you will read about in this book. The same is true of Archbishop Thomas Bradwardine of Canterbury, a tireless defender of evangelical faith during the fourteenth century. A handful of other leading scholars cried out for a recovery of the biblical gospel.

Nevertheless, *preaching* and *teaching* the radical message of a God who does all the saving and leaves nothing for us to claim as our own contribution was considered a threat to the medieval church’s authority over salvation management. In fact, preaching and teaching in general were at low ebb. For the most part the laity, largely illiterate, had to let their priests do their thinking for them. The people who really mattered in the medieval church were monks

and nuns, “the religious,” who had given up their worldly stations in life for a better chance at gaining divine favor.

So what were the revolutionary ideas that disrupted Europe and threw both church and society into turmoil? There were several.

Slogans help us quickly identify someone’s point of view. In fact, one can form an opinion of some people just by reading their bumper stickers. The Reformation, too, had slogans which identified its core concerns. The first was *sola scriptura*, which means “Scripture alone.”

### The Scriptures Alone

The study of original texts inspired by the Renaissance led the Reformers back to the Scriptures, in the original Hebrew and Greek. They realized how much mistranslation, misunderstanding, and misinterpretation had accumulated over the centuries, obscuring the biblical text. Can the church legislate doctrines or moral regulations that are not found in the Bible? The Reformers answered, “No, it’s by Scripture alone that we know God and his gospel.” Can the church maintain infallibility in interpreting the Bible? No, they responded, absolutely not.

Of course, *sola scriptura* did not mean, as it has come to be interpreted in some circles today, that the laity were to use the Bible as a wax nose to be shaped by private, subjective opinion; rather, it meant that all believers had the right and responsibility to read, understand, and obey God’s Word—with the rest of the church. That is why the Bible was translated from the original languages into the tongues of the people and was made available to the masses.

The assumption behind this was that the central story of God’s saving purposes in Christ is so clearly revealed that even a milkmaid or plowboy could understand it. Not everything in Scripture is equally clear or easy to understand, but the gospel is plainly revealed from Genesis to Revelation. This was a revolutionary idea in an era when the average person had been taught (explicitly or implicitly) that the Bible is a confusing and difficult book that requires an infallible teacher. Luther said that “the average person today says, ‘I am a layman, and no priest; I go to mass, hear what my priest says, and him I believe.’”

However, wherever the Reformation took hold, people would read the Bible at lunch breaks and sing the psalms while hiking with their families. Christ gave us pastors, teachers, and elders to lead us, but God’s Word is a gift to all of his people. Teachers were desperately needed for that very purpose: to help Christians know what they believed and why they believed it. Without a consensus about what Scripture taught—and well-trained pastors and teachers who could discern between truth and error—the church would lose the treasure it had been given. Yet it is a treasure that must be rediscovered and defended anew in each generation and never taken for granted. Therefore, the church is always fallible and always liable to correction from God’s transcendent, infallible revelation.

*Sola scriptura* has fallen on hard times again, it seems. Columbia University professor Randall Balmer notes, “In truth, despite all the evangelical rhetoric about *sola scriptura* in the twentieth century, most evangelicals don’t trust themselves to interpret the Bible, so they turn to others—local pastors, mendicant preachers and lecturers, authors of thousands of books, commentaries, and reference tools—for interpretive schemes.”<sup>1</sup>

### Grace Alone, in Christ Alone, through Faith Alone

Do you think of the Bible primarily as a handbook for daily living—in other words, as a collection of moral commands, suggestions, and examples? The Reformers were so insistent about Scripture alone as our final authority because it is only there where God tells us the Good News. The focus of the Bible is not on the question, “What would Jesus do?” but on, “What has Jesus done?” From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible is an unfolding story of God’s eternal purpose to glorify himself in the salvation that comes through Jesus Christ. So the other “*solas*” (or “alones”) of the Reformation followed: salvation comes to us by grace alone (*sola gratia*), in Christ alone (*solo Christo*), through faith alone (*sola fide*).

All Christians think of Jesus Christ as essential. But is he essential primarily as a teacher, moral example, and life coach, or as the Lamb of God in whom we find forgiveness, peace with God, and everlasting life? If we don’t really think we need to be saved from

the justice of a holy God, then we hardly need the kind of extreme rescue operation that the Bible announces. If we are basically good people needing a little direction, then the situation hardly calls for God to assume our humanity, fulfill all righteousness in our place, bear our guilt through a cruel crucifixion, and be raised bodily as the beginning of the new creation. Yet that is just the kind of salvation we need. It is not that Jesus Christ makes up for whatever we lack in the righteousness department but that his righteousness alone is sufficient to stand in God's judgment. The gospel is not Christ plus our spiritual disciplines, Christ plus free will, Christ plus our acts of love and service to others, or Christ plus our pious experiences, but Christ *alone*. All of our salvation is found in Christ, not in ourselves.

Medieval believers were constantly reminded how much their relationship with God depended on them. The super saints realized it was impossible to live without sin in the world, so they joined the monasteries. Luther was one such monk, but he soon understood the point Christ made to the Pharisees about sin being inherent in each one of us. Jesus told them, paraphrased, "It's not what goes into a man that makes him unclean, but what's already in there!" Sin is not out there, in the world, but in here, in me. It corrupts me regardless of my station or surroundings. From clear passages in Scripture, Luther realized that God is no softy. He is just and holy, incapable of overlooking our sins. So the German monk spent hours in confession, hoping God would notice him for his many tears. His fear was, of course, that if he failed to confess, or failed to remember in order to confess, one single sin, that would be enough for God to condemn him.

Luther knew his will was in bondage to sin, so how could he ever break the cycle and be free? Inspirational sermons aimed at motivating hearers to simply use the free will God gave them fell short of comforting him. Luther knew there had to be either another answer, or no answer.

While Luther was teaching Psalms, Galatians, and Romans, the gospel began to leap off the pages. As he was reading about God's righteousness, Luther was struck by what felt like a bolt of lightning. All his life he had hated the righteousness of God, though he appeared outwardly pious. It was that righteousness, after all, which hung above him like the sword of Damocles and reminded him day

after day that he was a sinner and must be judged. Now he understood for the first time the righteousness which God not only *is*, but *gives*. “For in the gospel,” writes the apostle Paul, “a righteousness *from* God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith’” (Rom. 1:17, italics added). God judges us not only *by* his righteousness, but *with* his righteousness imputed to our account. The doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone was recovered and polished to its New Testament brilliance.

At this point Luther understood not only that salvation was by grace alone, but that the means or method of receiving it was through faith alone; hence, the next slogan, *sola fide*, or “by faith alone.” The church had always said we are saved by grace. Some even argued that we were saved by grace *alone*, but Scripture is still more definite: when it comes to our legal standing before God, faith (trusting in *Christ*) is opposed to works (trusting in *Christ and* our own efforts). The official teaching of the church at the time was that grace is *infused* or *imparted* as a boost to help us live a holy life so that eventually we can go to heaven. But we have to make proper use of that grace; all along the way there are opportunities to lose grace, the church taught. Through the rituals, spiritual exercises, pious formulas, and routines of the church, grace lost could be regained. So, in practice, the view was that we are saved by grace *transforming us into holy people*. To this the Reformers responded that salvation was to be viewed, before anything else, as God’s act of *declaring righteous* those who were, at that very moment, still unrighteous. Thus justification was not something the believer had to wait for until the end of life, but was declared at the beginning of the Christian life—the moment he or she trusts Christ alone for salvation from divine wrath.

In other words, salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. God does not give us the grace to save ourselves with his aid. He declares us righteous the moment we give up our own claims to righteousness and our own struggles for divine approval and recognize the sufficiency of Christ’s righteousness as our own.

Today once again, this has become a revolutionary idea, it seems, with so many Christians caught up in introspective “navel-gazing” and anxiety because of guilt. Even faith can become a work—something we’re supposed to pump up inside of ourselves. Instead

of seeing faith as the empty hand embracing Christ, we begin to treat faith itself as our contribution. The more faith we have, the more blessing. Instead of worrying if our works are good enough to balance out the scales of justice, we worry if our faith is good enough. However, this misses the point that our relationship with God depends on the worthiness of *Christ*, not our *faith*.

Others do not even seem to be bothered by God's justice and wrath, as if he is too nice to judge or they are too good to deserve a sentence. Yet when we come to know more about the God we're dealing with, sentimental "Santa Claus" images are dissolved. We find ourselves standing naked before a holy God, covered in filthy rags that we have mistaken for the latest in spiritual and moral fashion. Only then do we look outside of ourselves, cling to Christ the Mediator, and find in him everything we need.

The last slogan is *solī Deo gloria*, which means "To God alone be glory!" It stands to reason that if salvation comes from God, is in God, and is through God—from the Father, in the Son, and by the Spirit—then all glory goes to him rather than to us. There is no place for us to boast, but only to revel in grateful praise of the sovereign and gracious Father who has chosen us in his Son and united us forever to his Son by his Spirit.

In the old section of Heidelberg, Germany, there stands a marvelously preserved hotel and pub, a center of social life then and even today. At the top of the building, in raised gold letters, is written this Reformation slogan. Similarly, Johann Sebastian Bach signed all of his compositions "Soli Deo Gloria" or simply "SDG." J. I. Packer once told me our view of God is like a pair of old-fashioned scales. When God goes up in our estimation, we go down. Similarly, when we raise our sense of self-importance, our view of God must, to that same degree, be lowered. In the Reformation, the doctrines of grace were recovered and proclaimed from the pulpit. Blacksmiths found delight in discussing these subjects over a pint of ale with friends after a hard day's work. No longer did they have pastors who told them, "Oh, that's for theologians to discuss." God was great, and all were equal before him on their knees.

The Reformation produced an era of great thinkers, artists, and workers because it raised God high and bowed low the human head before his majesty. But today the superficial and trivial crowds out

the profound and reverent—even in our public worship. Our services are often celebrations of ourselves more than they are of God, more entertainment than worship. J. B. Phillips has well captured the modern sentiment toward Christianity in the title of one of his popular books: *Your God Is Too Small*. Never before, not even in the medieval church, have Christians been so obsessed with themselves. Never before have people entertained such grandiose notions about humans and such puny views of God. Evangelists talk about God as though he were to be pitied rather than worshiped, as though he were wringing his hands, hoping things would go better, that people would “let him have his way.” Never before, perhaps, has God been so totally forgotten and lowered in our estimation. Self-esteem, self-image, self-confidence, self-this, and self-that have replaced talk of God’s attributes. Ironically, this has created the opposite of its intention. The more time we spend contemplating our own greatness in the mirror, the more clearly we are bound to see the warts. Without the knowledge of the God in whose image we have been created and the grace which has made us children of God, narcissism (self-love) evolves quickly into depression (self-hate).

But all of that can change! The pans of that scale can reverse. It has happened at other times in history, and it can happen again.

Finally, I would be remiss if I failed to mention the Reformation concern over “the priesthood of all believers.” Luther and Calvin challenged the monastic way of life, telling carpenters, milkmaids, lawyers, and homemakers that their work in the world was as much a divinely ordained calling, and certainly at least as worthwhile, as being part of the giant bureaucratic network of Christian organizations which characterized medieval religious life. They argued that God takes *this* world and *this* life seriously, as well as the next, and that Christians should, too. Secular work is not merely a means of making money to give to the church or of providing the necessary income in order to have the leisure to volunteer for ministry-related activities. Work is godly, said the Reformers. Why? Because it builds character or scores heavenly points and puts jewels in our crown? No, but because God has freed us from worrying about these things in order simply to love and serve our neighbors out of gratitude for the gift we have been given. God is caring for the daily needs of our neighbors through our ordinary vocations. Christian

craftsmen should be the *best* craftsmen. Christian artists should put their hearts and souls into their work. After all, it's not a job; it's a *calling*!

In short, the Reformation liberated believers from the tyranny of the church, but not from its care; from the anxiety of securing divine acceptance; from the preoccupation with self which always winds up driving us to despair; from a low view of God; and from a low view of one's callings in the world. The Reformation brought freedom back to the Christian conscience by restoring the focus of the gospel from being us-centered to being God-centered, Christ-centered. We need that sort of shift again today.

Not everyone will agree with the content of this book, but the Reformation tradition is a rich vein. If we ignore it, we shall be the poorer. It is *catholic*, in the best sense of that word. The Reformation sought the reform of the church, not its destruction. It shares with the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox communities a love for the creeds and the early witness to Christ, an appreciation for the wisdom of centuries of insight, and an insistence that Christians learn God's Word *together*, not in an individualistic, subjective way. It is a *biblical* tradition, testing belief and the actions that flow from belief by the Scriptures directly. It is an *evangelistic* tradition, having its roots in the recovery of the *evangel* itself. Many mistakenly criticize the Reformation for a lack of missionary emphasis. Yet what was the recovery of the gospel itself and its spread throughout all of Europe but a singular missionary enterprise? Furthermore, missionaries were sent to far-flung lands. The first Protestant missionaries in the Western Hemisphere were sent from Calvin's Geneva. Many of the greatest evangelists and missionaries the world has ever known have been committed to the convictions shared in this volume.

It is a *practical* tradition. The Reformation faith has produced a concern for the physical as well as spiritual welfare of people, convinced that God has called his people to live and work in this world. It is not content to save souls alone, while homeless bodies huddle around a campfire to keep warm. This has been demonstrated in the incredible model Geneva became, as daily thousands of refugees fleeing persecution were cared for, accommodated, and employed. Under the deacons and deaconesses a hospital was established, industry thrived, and refugees were taught simple trades.

Protestants and Catholics alike recognized the remarkable achievements of Geneva in erecting a center of practical godliness, beyond monastic and individualistic piety.

It is a *worshiping* tradition. Because God is great, he ought to be worshiped reverently. Furthermore, many of the Reformers were concerned not to “throw the baby out with the bath water.” It was the goal of Luther and Calvin to reform the church, not to abolish it and start from scratch. The churches of this tradition produced some of the most impressive hymnody and psalmody in church history, rich and moving musically as well as lyrically.

There are many other contributions this tradition makes and ought to continue making in the twenty-first century. The world is looking for a church that knows what it’s here to accomplish and for Christians who know what they believe and why they believe it. May God use this brief survey in some slight measure toward that end. And let’s put *amazing* back into *grace*!

# — 1 —

## Jumping through Hoops Is for Circus Animals

For a long time in Western countries, being a Christian was normal and rejecting the doctrines of the faith was considered heresy. Today, in nominally “Christian” cultures, it’s just the opposite. Being either apathetic toward or critical of orthodox Christianity is normal, and being a disciple of Christ is considered “heretical”—a departure from the spirit of the age. In one sense, we’re in a better position to take the faith seriously. We can’t go with the flow, letting others do our thinking, believing, and living for us. We have to investigate what we believe and why we believe it. We have to make a conscious decision to trust in Christ and be formed by his Word.

But that’s exactly why it is so important that churches take their calling seriously. As a seminary teacher, I have students from Africa who tell me about the intense catechesis (instruction) their churches require of new believers. Given many Africans’ background in animism and Islam, their conversion entails a lot more than saying a little prayer to ask Jesus to come into their heart! Yet in places like North America, we seem to assume that discipleship is less serious, less demanding. We do not seem to appreciate the extent to which we ourselves are seduced by the idols of our own culture and require

in-depth, continuous, dedicated deprogramming by faithful teachers. If now, more than ever, people have to become Christians intentionally, then the church is obligated to facilitate that growth. Instead of bottle-feeding milk even to those who can handle solid food, the church's ministry needs to prepare us for real life in the adult world.

Like many Christians, I was spoon-fed. We were "Bible believers," which meant that you didn't have to worry about what we believed or why we believed it; we just believed the Bible. We taught what the Bible teaches. We lived on slogans. Whenever someone asked a tough question, the frequent response was simply to pray more, read the Bible more, and witness more; and perhaps the intensity of our devotion and experience would drive away questions, anxieties, or doubts. But slogans are not worthy rivals to the culture's powerful stories, dogmas, and practices that vie for authority in defining our lives. Singing love songs to Jesus over and over again will not create roots that grow deep into Christ so that we are like trees planted by the waters in a wasteland. Constant exhortations to do more, be more, love more, experience more, and give more only lead to burnout. The gospel alone can reignite that flame.

There was a time when I thought I would cash in my chips and leave what appeared at times to be a game. *Is it true?* I asked again and again. *Can we say that the Bible contains the only reliable revelation from God to humans?* Many people—intelligent people—think logically and rationally about every other aspect of their lives and then shut their minds when it comes to religion. But we all have questions, and my questions grew deeper and deeper until the answer finally stared me in the face.

Reared in a solid Christian home, with the nurture of daily devotions and the simple piety of believing parents, I was offered the warm, supportive, meaningful environment of evangelical Christianity. But during my teenage years, the same clichés, slogans, and experiences that had provided a sense of being "in" and of belonging to a group began to appear shallow and trite and seemed to embody the contentless trappings of what Francis Schaeffer called the "evangelical ghetto." The rules I had never questioned began to choke me. My Christian schools became prisons. In the seventh grade, I had a Bible instructor who took particular delight in enumerating the things for which we could be damned. If, for instance, we were to

die with an unconfessed sin, we could be eternally lost. The implications haunted me, and I could not understand why my schoolmates were relatively calm, especially since the level of actual law-keeping was so unimpressive among them, too. I worried: What if I really messed up some Saturday night and Jesus came back before I could walk down the aisle again on Sunday? What if I couldn't remember a particular sin in order to confess it? There were so many ways I could lose my soul!

Meanwhile, I began reading Paul's epistle to the Romans and couldn't put it down. I would read a passage and then wonder, *Why don't I hear this in school or in church?* Finally in class one day, when the Bible instructor was haunting us again with doom and gloom, I remembered a passage from Romans. Raising my hand, I interrupted before I could catch myself. "That's not what the Bible says," I retorted—not in a dogmatic way. I just said it. "However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness," I continued, quoting the apostle Paul (Rom. 4:5). The teacher turned multiple shades of red and shouted, "The Bible also says, 'By their fruits you shall know them!'" "Yes," I replied, "but by their fruits *we* shall know them—God knows them by their faith."

"Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him" (Rom. 4:7–8)—that's the good news Paul had in mind in Romans. And yet so many Christians I've met have experienced the same doubts and fears that drove me to the brink of despair. Is God for or against me? It doesn't help to soft-pedal sin, as though God is so loving and forgiving that he can just overlook our momentary lapses. Deep down we know that he is holy and just and that we are guilty and must be judged by the letter and spirit of the law.

The "Romans revolution" that day in Bible class gave me a new lease on life, and I began studying the book with obsessive fascination. The towering peaks of Paul's exposition of such themes as the human condition, guilt, justification, union with Christ, sanctification, election and divine sovereignty, and the perseverance of God with his people became the new foundation for my faith. I began meeting other Christians who were on the same trek; we had always heard about grace and sung about grace, but now we felt like we

really understood it and experienced it for the first time. God does it all, and we contribute nothing but our sinfulness. What a liberating message! Humbling, to be sure, but liberating just the same. It is no surprise that John Newton wrote “Amazing Grace” as a response to his discovery of the doctrines of grace we’ll be exploring in this book. God’s grace reorients our thinking, redirects our faith, and reignites our hope, filling us with a heartfelt joy that fuels us for lives of service and love in the world.

In his book *The Choice of Truth*, Daniel Thrapp says, “The purpose of life is the quest for truth.”<sup>1</sup> Christians, of all people, should be committed to that pursuit, regardless of the consequences. After all, we believe that the truth is first and foremost a living person: Jesus Christ. Usually we want to control the truth, to decide for ourselves whether it will be helpful, practical, and supportive of our general presuppositions. But truth is often unkind to our notions of what is useful knowledge. When Erasmus tried to cool off Martin Luther about the debate over free will and grace, the Reformer responded, “If we are not supposed to know for certain whether God does everything in salvation, then, dear Erasmus, I ask you, what *is* useful to be known?” At a time when Christian cookbooks, dating manuals, and self-help guides are the rage and doctrinal discussions are ignored, there is perhaps no better question we can ask the modern church.

These days the world is often more profound than the church. One frequently hears honest pagans asking really good questions: What is the meaning of life? Why is there evil and why do we die? How do we really know that there is a God—and, if so, that this God is anything like the one depicted in the Bible and praised in church? Meanwhile, we evangelicals seem to be making the most trivial queries: What car would Jesus drive? What happens if you miss your quiet time? Is dancing a sin? Should we immerse, sprinkle, or pour? Is Jesus really coming back in November? Is Iraq “Magog,” and if so, is the Antichrist living somewhere in Europe or the Middle East right now? While we’re busy organizing ever-greater conferences and conventions so we can talk to ourselves, give each other awards, and dazzle each other with the latest evangelical superstars, the world is taking its business elsewhere, to merchants who care about the big questions. Philosopher Paul C. Payne noted that the world does not take the church seriously today because the church is not serious.

Many Christians are also put off by the term *doctrine*, either because it is perceived as having “for professionals only” written large across it, or because it is regarded as causing unnecessary division in the body of Christ. As for the first objection, it cannot be denied that in our day, as in the period before the Reformation, doctrine is left to the experts, while the laity are simply expected to nod to the essentials. But that is not the biblical way of looking at it. Paul had a soft spot in his heart for the Bereans because they were constantly searching the Scriptures to see if Paul’s teaching was true (see Acts 17:11). In the apostolic church, according to Acts 2:42, average Christians “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching [doctrine]” as well as to prayer and the Lord’s Table. Understanding doctrinal or theological issues was considered the responsibility of every Christian, not just a few select professionals. As for the concern that doctrine always seems to bring strife, I can’t disagree more. Of course, truth always divides. Even at the most basic question, the world is divided between those who affirm God’s existence and those who deny it. To the extent that we actually have convictions worth wrestling with at all, there will be many others who disagree. However, Christian doctrine also *unites*. How else could the early church hold together those who had come from a variety of ethnic, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds? What united them was not a common culture or a common political ideology, shared playlists on their iPods, or common experiences, but a common creed. That common doctrinal affirmation transcended any petty divisions and pulled the group together during its most severe trials.

The message this book explores was the revolutionary force behind the ministries of the prophets, Jesus, and the apostles as well as Augustine and the Reformers. It inspired the Great Awakening in America. Columbia University historian Eugene F. Rice Jr. contrasts the Reformation faith with the modern mentality, often pervasive in even Christian circles:

All the more strikingly it [the Reformation] measures the gulf between the secular imagination of the twentieth century and sixteenth-century Protestantism’s intoxication with the majesty of God. We can only exercise historical sympathy to try to understand how it was that many of the most sensitive intelligences of a whole epoch found

a supreme, a total, liberty in the abandonment of human weakness to the omnipotence of God.<sup>2</sup>

Grace is the gospel. The extent to which we are unclear about who does what in salvation is the degree to which we will obscure the gospel. At a time when moralism, self-righteousness, and self-help religion dominate in much of evangelical preaching, publishing, and broadcasting, we desperately need a return to this message of grace. We need to emphasize once again Paul's inspired commentary: "It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy" (Rom. 9:16). Our sense of purpose, as individuals and as a church, depends largely on how clearly we grasp certain truths about who God is, who we are, and what God's plan for history involves. Christians form a new humanity, a new spiritual race. Just as a rib was taken from Adam's side to create Eve, God has taken people "from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God" (Rev. 5:9–10). This new race exists for a purpose, a definite reason. It exists to receive and then proclaim God's forgiveness and to make God's glory felt in a dark and drab world. The new race is to be found in every imaginable ethnic, cultural, social, economic, and national grouping. It is seen dispersed throughout every stratum: in hospitals and schools, in homes and offices, from the coastal beaches to the city skyscrapers.

The message you will find in this book not only has produced the upsurges of Christian faithfulness in past ages but also holds out promise to change the shape of contemporary faith and practice. Speaking for myself, I am confident that I would not be a Christian today were it not for the doctrine of grace. Are you tired of jumping through hoops? Are you looking for a radical view of God and his saving grace? Then join me on this brief and incomplete tour of the most revolutionary message you will ever encounter.

## — 2 —

### Created with Class

“God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). Thus the human story began.

Whenever we take up the subject of redemption, that is where we need to begin, at the beginning, with creation. Very often, however, a gospel presentation starts with the fall—the origin of human sin and the need for redemption. But creation is the proper starting point for any consideration of human identity and its recovery through the gospel. Why is this?

When we discuss the fall without having appreciated the majesty of the human creature by virtue of creation, the impression is given that there is something inherent in our humanness that predisposes us to sin, that there is something deeply sinful and unspiritual in being human. This approach presumes the accuracy of Shakespeare’s famous words, now become cliché, “To err is human.” But the biblical response would be, “To err is the result of human *fallenness*.” In other words, there is nothing wrong with the Manufacturer or his product; the problem is with what his creatures decided to do with the freedom he sovereignly gave them.

So creation is not the problem, and it is only when we more fully appreciate the majesty of humanity as God’s creation that we can adequately weigh the horror of the fall.

Creation is an important starting point, too, because the better we understand ourselves, the better we will come to know God. As Calvin wrote, “We must now speak of the creation of man: not only because among all God’s works here is the noblest and most remarkable example of His justice, wisdom, and goodness; but because . . . we cannot have a clear and complete knowledge of God unless it is accompanied by a corresponding knowledge of ourselves.”<sup>1</sup>

Following are some of the important lessons we learn from the biblical doctrine of creation.

### Creation Marks Us with God’s Image

We’re especially image-conscious today. However, we try in vain to ground this image in ourselves. Without *God* as the original, we lose any sense of being an image bearer of someone higher than ourselves. So our “self-image” becomes something we create and choose from a menu of options, rather than embrace and acknowledge as an ineradicable fact of our nature.

What makes humans so special? Is it that we have evolved beyond the level of other creatures? We do bear a resemblance to other creatures. For example, wild beasts travel in herds, birds fly in flocks, and humans have often moved in tribes. But we all know that there is something that sets humans apart—something transcendent.

Before his heavenly court, God resolved to “make man in our image, in our likeness.” This would entitle this new creature to “rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:26–27).

Never before had God brought into existence a creature with such intimate ties to his own character. Through ages past the Holy Trinity was entertained at court by angelic hosts—seraphim and cherubim continually crying, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty” and serving him who “makes winds his messengers, flames of fire his servants” (Rev. 4:8; Ps. 104:4). But when he created this

new race in his own image, the heavenly hosts must have wondered in silent awe at what this amazing creature would act like, look like, sound like.

A good deal of ink has been used trying to answer the question, “What is the image of God in humanity?” From God’s Word, we can discern some of the features.

First, as created, humanity was similar to God in terms of moral perfection. “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). God saw no internal defects in his human creature. There was nothing in human nature as God created it that would predispose the race to sin. There was righteousness, holiness, godliness. In short, Adam and Eve were as much like God as a creature can be like its creator. All of life was to be a part of worship. Whether planning the future, naming the animals, raising children, building cities, writing music, playing sports, or reflecting on the meaning of it all, everything was God-centered. But while all of creation reflected God’s handiwork, only humans could *reflect* on their *reflecting* God’s handiwork. In other words, only humans could look back from the clouds, as it were, to contemplate their place in the universe.

We see this even after the fall, with the psalmist as he stargazed from a grassy knoll. Looking at the expanse of the heavens, he wondered,

When I consider your heavens,  
the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars,  
which you have set in place,  
what is man that you are mindful of him,  
the son of man that you care for him?

David concludes his reflection with this answer:

You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings  
and crowned him with glory and honor.  
You made him ruler over the works of your hands;  
you put everything under his feet:  
all flocks and herds,  
and the beasts of the field,

the birds of the air,  
and the fish of the sea,  
all that swim the paths of the seas.

This reflection is to lead us not to some sort of narcissistic self-centeredness, but to raise our eyes toward our Creator: “O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (Ps. 8:3–9).

Beyond moral perfection, Adam and Eve enjoyed a creative link with their Creator. God imagined a world and brought it into being—and what imagination! Think of the variety in shades and colors of fish and flowers. Even before the microscope and telescope introduced us to the micro- and macrouniverses, the details of shape, size, color, and function were as fascinating and as seemingly infinite as we now know them to be. Of course, God is the Creator, and we are creatures. Nevertheless, humans mimic God in imagination. Think of the technological advances in our own century. Only God has the power to create “out of nothing” (*ex nihilo*), but those he created in his image are able to reflect his creative imagination in singularly impressive imitation.

I once asked a friend who is quite an expert on classical composers what determines a master’s genius. He answered, “Even though each made a distinct contribution, most of the greats would tell you that they were imitators of the masters who had gone before them.” That is undoubtedly true of our creativity in relation to our Creator.

The image of God is also reflected in the religious dimension of human existence. In other words, being created in God’s image means that we share with God an invincible sense of and concern for the eternal. “For in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). We can no more deny spiritual issues than a fish can swim in sand. God shares his world with us, and we cannot pass a single corner of it without being reminded of that fact.

You will notice that I have used the term *perfection* repeatedly. Of course, humanity lost moral, creative, and religious perfection in the fall; but the race did not lose moral, creative, and religious *capacity*. God gave us—and expected of us—perfection in all of our likeness to him. Because God created us in his image, we have the *natural* capacity for approaching his perfection, even though we have lost all *moral* capacity for achieving the same.

## Creation Is Universal

On the face of it, this is an incredibly obvious point, and yet it is often overlooked. Not just believers but all people are created in God's image. James warned the faithful against the hypocrisy of using the same tongue to "praise our Lord and Father" and to "curse men, who have been made in God's likeness" (3:9). When we mistreat others or look down on them, we are despising God's image.

In one sense, this universal character of the divine image is a plus; in another sense, a minus. First the good news: the universality of the divine image means that your neighbor, whether the world's most obstinate atheist or a pastor's wife, is an equal in sharing the image of God. This divine imprimatur is the result of creation, not redemption. The image of God which requires us to respect those who bear it therefore requires us to recognize the dignity of all human beings, regardless of who they are, what they believe, or what they do.

It is also a positive thing for everybody in the sense that all humans share a capacity for moral, creative, and religious interest. Of course, this does not mean we can move toward God or even believe in him before he regenerates us, but that all human beings share a common moral, creative, and religious dimension whose indelible stamp cannot be rubbed out even by the most inventive solutions concocted in the rebel laboratory.

Yet our creation in God's image also holds us all accountable. Not only has God left his fingerprints all over creation, he has left upon the human heart a yearning that makes human beings dust the creation for them. The majestic imprimatur of God's handiwork that makes us so significant in the universe also holds us responsible for our response to the Creator. Our responsibility is the threat implied in the universality of the image of God. Because the religious dimension is intrinsic to our humanness and because God has so clearly demonstrated his existence in the world around us, there is no such thing as an atheist. There is no such thing as someone who has "never heard."

The apostle Paul explains: "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse" (Rom. 1:20).

People do “suppress the truth by their wickedness” (Rom. 1:18), but the very fact that we suppress it means we can never eradicate God’s revelation. This *is* God’s world, regardless of what we might wish were the case. And we cannot eradicate this awareness of God’s existence and our accountability to him, no matter how hard we try or how much energy, time, and money we expend in trying to cover it up. The creature will always be the dependent of the Creator, whether the creature recognizes God in this life or is judged by him in the next. And notice the crucial role our conscience plays in all of this: “Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them” (Rom. 2:14–15).

The language Paul uses is legal, courtroom vocabulary. And he enters our conscience, created in God’s image and impressed with images of God from years of scanning the creation, as evidence, Exhibit A, against our ignorance plea. On that final day before the bar of judgment, no one will be able to say, “I wasn’t given enough information.” It is a weighty thing, weighty and dangerous, to be created in the image of God.

Have you ever accepted Jesus Christ as your Creator? We speak of accepting him as Savior and Lord—in other words, as the source of our redemption. But how often do we think of him as the author of our creation? According to John, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it” (John 1:1–5).

### Why Are We Here?

Modern science has promised more than it can deliver. That accounts for much of the cynicism postmoderns seem to have toward finding the answers to their ultimate questions. To be sure, science

is better equipped to answer some questions than any other field. For instance, it is science and not theology that will tell us the age of the earth. The Bible does not provide that kind of information, nor does it care to. Nevertheless, it is an important and reasonable question. There are a lot of important and reasonable questions the Bible does not try to answer. If it did, there would be a lot of unemployed geologists!

While science will lead the way toward the discovery of *when* we got here and will help us find the reasons for *how* we got here (beyond the revelation we already have in the inspired text of Genesis 1–3), there is a question to which those other questions ultimately lead, a question, nevertheless, which science will never be able to answer any more than theology will be able to determine the age of the earth. That question is, “*Why* are we here?”

Sir John Eccles, Nobel laureate and a pioneer in brain research, said, “The law of gravitation was not the final truth,” and went on to explain how many modern scientists have turned the discipline into a “superstition” by claiming that “we only have to know more about the brain” to understand ourselves and our significance. Eccles concludes: “Science cannot explain the existence of each of us as a unique self, nor can it answer such fundamental questions as: Who am I? Why am I here? How did I come to be at a certain place and time? What happens after death? These are all mysteries beyond science.” Notice Eccles’s indictment: “Science has gone too far in breaking down man’s belief in his spiritual greatness and has given him the belief that he is merely an insignificant animal who has arisen by chance and necessity on an insignificant planet lost in the great cosmic immensity.”<sup>2</sup>

The rise of modern science in the seventeenth century was largely the self-conscious search for the evidence of harmony and order known to exist in God’s universe. Because humanity had a huge place in God’s plan, it was assumed that one could know the “whys” from special revelation (the Bible) and go on to piece together the “hows” and “whens” from natural revelation (creation). What, then, does the Bible tell us about the purpose behind our existence?

Every craft points to the skill and character of the artist. And creation speaks eloquently of its Creator. One popular theory seems to suggest that God created us because he was lonely. That notion

would surprise many, such as Augustine, who once wrote not that God had a “human-shaped vacuum” but that man had a God-shaped vacuum that only God could fill. The dictionary defines *lonely* as “the absence of company; destitute of sympathetic companionship.” Now, whatever can be said about loneliness, we should find little support in Scripture for the idea that it can be applied to the Holy Trinity, surrounded, supported, and shielded by the presence and choral processions of thousands upon thousands of heavenly hosts in assembly! God is not lonely without the presence of humans; rather, it is we who are lonely without God.

There is yet another theory. Some argue that God created humans because he wanted to have creatures who loved him of their own free will. After all, the angels *had* to do God’s bidding. They don’t love God freely, but by compulsion. This too, however, seems to give too much to human credit and, more substantially, finds no explicit support in Scripture. Instead, we are told that a great number of heaven’s angels freely joined the satanic mutiny (see 2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6; Rev. 12:7). So much for compulsion!

This question is not just an exercise in theological *Jeopardy!* It is more than semantics; it determines whether we are to view creation from a human-centered or a God-centered point of view. Does God exist for our purpose or do we exist for his?

Once again, the psalmist offers us the biblical answer to that central question:

How many are your works, O LORD!  
 In wisdom you made them all;  
 the earth is full of your creatures.  
 There is the sea, vast and spacious,  
 teeming with creatures beyond number—  
 living things both large and small. . . .  
 When you give it to them,  
 they gather it up;  
 when you open your hand,  
 they are satisfied with good things.  
 When you hide your face,  
 they are terrified;  
 when you take away their breath,  
 they die and return to the dust.

When you send your Spirit,  
they are created,  
and you renew the face of the earth.  
May the glory of the LORD endure forever;  
may the LORD rejoice in his works.

Psalm 104:24–25, 28–31

Notice especially those last two lines: “May the glory of the LORD endure forever; may the LORD rejoice in his works.” This is the purpose behind our creation and our daily existence. For the same reason an artist takes pleasure in his masterpiece, God takes pleasure in his works. Thus, the purpose of our creation is the pleasure of God. It is not for our happiness or pleasure that we exist, but for God’s. That is a very different orientation from the one we are constantly offered in our popular commercial culture—an orientation that has made vast inroads into our own evangelical subculture.

To the question, “What is the chief end of man?” the Westminster Shorter Catechism leads off with its famous answer: “To glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” What a loaded sentence! There is a sense, then, in which we were created in order to take pleasure in God as well as his taking pleasure in us. In fact, it is the purpose of earthly pleasures and joys to raise our senses to the enjoyment of God. This means that as long as our pleasure-seeking is calculated to be, in the end, a form of God-seeking, it is an acceptable and, in fact, godly pursuit. Imagine the implications of this sort of thinking! We see it throughout the Old Testament, in the history of a life-loving and world-embracing people who, at their best, squeezed the juice out of life’s every grape in order to participate in the fullness of “enjoying God forever.” It is the story of a man, God in the flesh, who not only saw fit to bless the union of a husband and a wife, but also provided a miraculous vintage of wine to celebrate the occasion. No one can appreciate the Hebrew/Christian understanding of creation and remain insensitive to its world-affirming character.

I realize this is an especially controversial point of view in circles where we are taught to despise the world and its pleasures. (Of course, we haven’t yet come to the chapter on the fall, where we will see in greater detail how the world is, like you and me, both a victim and an active participant in the Adamic rebellion.) Yet, according

to Scripture, it is not the world per se that's the problem—just as it is not humanity per se, but rather the world and humanity, *set at odds against* their Creator.

An ancient cult known as Manichaeism (influenced by Gnosticism) attributed evil to matter; the human spirit was pure, but the body, intelligence, and fleshly appetites were inherently demonic. Against this error Calvin countered, “The depravity and malice both of man and of the devil, or the sins that arise therefrom, *do not spring from nature, but rather from the corruption of nature.*”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, “Let us not be ashamed to take pious delight in the works of God open and manifest in this most beautiful theater.”<sup>4</sup>

It was Jesus himself who scandalized the Pharisees over their misunderstanding of the nature of sin. Sin, he told them, did not come to them from the world, as though the world carried an infectious disease which, if one got too close, would infect the healthy. Rather, he said, it's the other way around. It is we who, due to the sinfulness of our own hearts, pollute the world (see Matt. 15:11). It is we who turn the gifts intended to remind us of God's care and favor toward us into either evils (legalism) or abuses (license).

Thus when we consider the purpose of our creation, it is essential that we appreciate its God-centered justification. God takes pleasure in us and in seeing us take pleasure in him. Only with that perspective as our backdrop can we understand the meaning behind work and leisure, pleasure and restraint, life and death, laughter and tears.

### The Doctrine of Creation Has Its Benefits

The practical benefits of this doctrine are obvious. First, we have an incredibly weighty existence which requires that we respect God and our neighbor whether the latter is a Christian or not. It means that we should expect to find common ground with non-Christians as a natural part of human existence. We can build cars together on the assembly line or work together on city councils and school boards without being antagonistic or adversarial. After all, civic life finds its origin in creation rather than in redemption. When George Orwell talks about “Big Brother,” or philosophers decry the decline of Western civilization, or our neighbors sit around and discuss the

day's news, we are sometimes aloof, unconcerned, and uninformed. Unless the subject is explicitly religious or moral, we don't seem to get all that involved. (We perk up if someone pretends some new insight into the identity of the Antichrist.) Sometimes even when the issue is moral (such as civil rights in the 1950s), we have severed our doctrine of creation from our practice. It seems incongruous that those who argue for creation in the classroom so vehemently could, at times, miss its practical relevance for the whole of life.

Abortion is properly at the top of any list that seeks to apply the doctrine of creation to social issues. Nevertheless, concern for human life reaches beyond the birth of a child. Why must non-Christians lead struggles to preserve the environment which we Christians believe God commanded Adam to look after in the beginning? And why must non-Christians often lead the way in defending the civil rights of men and women when they do not even recognize a theological mandate from God? The more we appreciate the exciting truth of the doctrine of creation, the more we will grow in our sense of responsibility to God for our neighbors and our environment.

Another practical benefit is that the doctrine of creation frees us to enjoy work. I'm old enough to remember the band Loverboy's song "Working for the Weekend." There is a real loss in our society of what has been called the Protestant work ethic, a set of values based on the conviction that God has created us for a purpose—to serve our community. *Before* the fall, God instituted work as a holy, God-honoring, noble activity. Adam and Eve were given a calling, a vocation, to tame the lush, wild Garden of Eden. In Eden, everyone had a calling. Even after the fall, all men and women are given a calling by God—again, regardless of whether or not they are believers. According to Scripture, even ungodly rulers are considered "God's servants" (Rom. 13:1–6). Therefore, whether one is a truck driver or a homemaker; a corporate executive or a lawyer; a dishwasher or a doctor, one is pursuing a calling which God has included as part of his image in everyone. Christians especially should be inspired by this doctrine to pursue excellence and diligence in their callings and should recognize it as instituted by God in creation.

Another thing we learn from this biblical doctrine is that God is not interested only in religion. God did not invent Christian music

or Christian books. He has never organized a Christian concert or a Christian business directory. The doctrine of creation teaches us that, while in the realm of redemption (regeneration, justification, sanctification, union with Christ, etc.) we are different from non-Christians, in the realm of what we eat, drink, watch, play, work at, create, and discuss, we share a common humanity. What our convictions require is not that we deny our humanity, but that we be God-centered in the way in which we express our humanity. That is all creation was ever designed to reflect.

The doctrine of creation also convinces us that God is in control. Out of chaos he created order; out of darkness, light; and out of nothing, spectacular variety. Our own limitations make it impossible to understand the purpose behind every event, for often we are too close to a situation. Yet years go by and finally we see how everything came together into a colorful and orderly pattern. Imagine trying to navigate the globe before there were accurate maps, and compare that to the objectivity we now have due to satellite technology. Information, or a lack of it at the time, accounts for our ability or inability to understand how everything fits together. But we have learned enough through our technological sophistication to convince us of the principle that there *is* purpose, that it *does* all make sense, and that things *do* fit together, even though we might lack the data.

Similarly, we learn from the doctrine of creation the ultimate reason for the intelligibility of the world. The parts are integrated and interdependent, and one random accident could upset the entire balance of nature. To suggest that the present creation is the result of a random, chance event (or, according to nontheistic explanations of evolution, *multiple* random accidents) is more absurd to the human mind and experience than arguing that a fine Swiss watch was the product of a storm that blew through the craftsman's shop and arranged the parts into a working timepiece. This means, therefore, that what seems random to us is also under God's wise control. This is practical as a reminder that God is in control of every minute detail of our lives.

In his bestseller *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Rabbi Harold Kushner states, "Bad things do happen to good people in this world, but it is not God who wills it. God would like people

to get what they deserve in life, but He cannot always arrange it. Even God has a hard time keeping chaos in check and limiting the damage evil can do.”<sup>5</sup>

Such a limited view of God is exploded by the biblical notion of creation. It fails to account for a God who “determines the number of the stars” and who “calls them each by name” (Ps. 147:4), who numbers our hairs and sees to it that every robin’s breast has a pattern. While sin introduced disorder, destruction, and decay, the same God who created order from chaos is ruling and redeeming his world so that one day “the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay” even though “the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time” (Rom. 8:21–22).

Finally, the doctrine of creation leaves us without excuse. In the scientific religious ideology that dogmatically presupposes that there is no eternal perspective, we can only conclude with Dostoevsky that everything is permitted. But Scripture teaches us the significance of today’s actions in the long run. Our short lives here and now have eternal weight.

## Study Questions

1. “To err is human”: Is that correct? How would you respond in light of Genesis 1:31?
2. Carrying that a bit further, do you think there was anything inherent in Adam’s humanity, as created, that gave him at least a bent toward making a mistake or outright rebelling against God? (See Eccles. 7:29.)
3. What, more than anything else, distinguishes humans from animals?
4. Explain the “image of God” and its implications for the way we treat each other. Are non-Christians also created in God’s image? And if they are, how should we view those who are hostile to our faith? (See Matt. 5:44–45; Rom. 12:14; James 3:9.) How could this affect the way we relate to our neighbors or co-workers? Does it give us more of a sense of having things in common? Does it even mean that ungodly, un-Christian

- rulers are, in a sense, “God’s ministers,” though in the common (civil) sphere rather than in the church? (See Rom. 13:1–4.)
5. What does it mean to be created *ex nihilo*, “out of nothing,” and why is this such an important idea? How does this square with the Greek idea of spirit and matter being eternal?
  6. Explain the weight of being created in God’s image in terms of both promise and threat. (See Rom. 1:14–20.)
  7. Discuss the purpose behind creation. Evaluate each suggested theory in the light of one question: Is that theory God-centered or human-centered? (See also Pss. 8:3–9; 104:24–31.)
  8. Define *Gnosticism* and its view of creation. Evaluate it in the light of the creation account (see Gen. 1) and Matthew 15:11. Is the body a spiritual, godly, integral aspect of who we are, or should we seek to transcend our human bodies, minds, and passions and concentrate on our spirits? Does God relate to our spirits or to our whole human personalities? Why is this important for a healthy outlook on life?
  9. Discuss the implications of the doctrine of creation for enjoyment of working, resting, and playing in the world.