

Teaching Students About Grace

BY JON L. DYBDAHL

I suspect that many Adventist teachers sense, as I have, that something has been lacking in our teaching about divine grace. A majority of students do not clearly understand and experience this central doctrine of Christianity. They simply don't know in the depths of their beings that salvation is God's free gift through Jesus Christ.

These suspicions have been confirmed by hard evidence from the Valuegenesis survey. Almost three-fourths (72 percent) of Adventist youth have difficulty accepting that salvation is a gift rather than something earned.¹ Sixty-two percent of Adventist youth surveyed believe that the way to be accepted by God is to try sincerely to live a good life.² Only 28 percent believe that "there is nothing I can do to earn salvation."³

At least part of the problem seems to be communication, because a majority of teachers appear to hold correct beliefs in this area. Only 23 percent of teachers believe that the way to be accepted by God is to try sincerely to live a good life, while 83 percent believe there is nothing we can do to earn salvation.⁴ The possibility exists, however, that teachers know the right answers to survey questions, but haven't personally experienced certain doctrines and thus cannot model or personify their beliefs.

Our goal should not be to find reasons for the problem or to place blame. We need to look for answers. How can we remedy the situation? This article will divide the response into three main sections. First, a brief overview stressing the centrality of grace to faith. Second, a look at formidable barriers that make it a challenge to teach about grace, and third, some suggestions of practical ways to get the job done.

The Centrality of Grace

Although most Christians believe that salvation comes completely by God's grace through faith, this

doctrine is so crucial that we can benefit from reviewing its basic points. Unless we are convinced that grace is central to our doctrines and our life, we will not see it as a priority in teaching our students.

1. *The Bible makes grace central.* The Old Testament does contain laws, but it is not a book of legalism. Grace always precedes law.⁵ The Israelites' deliverance from Egypt comes before the giving of the Ten Commandments. God saves people before He asks them to obey.

The Bible makes it abundantly clear that the Israelites were God's chosen people, not because of anything that they had done, but simply because of His grace and love.

The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery (Deuteronomy 7:7, 8, NIV).

God delights in choosing little Davids to conquer Goliaths and fearful Gideons to overcome armies to make it abundantly clear that salvation comes only by His power, love, and grace, not our own.

The New Testament is also filled with God's grace. In as many different ways as possible, using a variety of authors and methods of expression, God tries to get the basic message across. "For it is by *grace* you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8, 9, NIV). We cannot get rid of our sins by anything we have done or will do. Only Jesus' death can make us clean again. We cannot compensate for our wrongs. In his classic summary of the gospel, Paul says this fact is of primary impor-

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tance—in fact, it is the first principle of the gospel. "For what I received I passed on to you as of *first importance*: that Christ died for our sins" (1 Corinthians 15:3, NIV). The importance of this central pillar is also shown by Paul's violent reaction to those who would attack the fundamental principle of grace. Reread the book of Galatians to see how strongly Paul, under the guidance of the Spirit, felt about any-

one whose teachings misinterpreted this doctrine.

2. *Grace is central to the teachings of Ellen White.* Ellen White speaks repeatedly on this topic. The following quotations nicely sum up her stand:

The third angel's message calls for the presentation of the Sabbath of the fourth commandment, and this truth must be brought before the world; but the great center of attraction, Jesus Christ, must not be left out of the third angel's message.⁶

What makes Jesus Christ the "great center of attraction"? This whole section is entitled "Christ Our Righteousness." We have no goodness except filthy rags, so only God's grace, manifested in Jesus, can provide righteousness for us. Farther on in this passage, she quotes Exodus 33:19 and 34:6, 7. These texts talk about God's goodness, mercy, and grace.

On the very next page Ellen White adds: "It is true that the law of God reveals the love of God when it is preached as the truth in Jesus; for the gift of Christ to this guilty world must be *largely* dwelt upon in *every* discourse."⁷ I know of no other topic that she says is to be "largely" dealt with in "every" presentation.

3. *Grace is central to the Protestant heritage.* The rallying cry of the Protestant Reformation was "by faith alone." Since grace was a gift and the *only* means of salvation, it could not be earned. It could only be received by faith. Many of our spiritual forebearers gave their lives for their convictions

about this truth. They believed any deviation on this topic led to religious apostasy that embraced works as a means of salvation.

4. *Grace is a central tenet of Christianity.* We live in a world in which non-Christian religions are spreading more widely than ever before. This has led to questions about what is so special about Christianity. The answer is twofold. First, Christianity is unique because of

its claims about Jesus—He is the one and only God-Man. The second unique feature of Christianity is its means of salvation—a gift of grace received by faith.

The world religions hold many moral values in common, but they view the function of ethical behavior in different ways. The Jesus way sees ethics as a response to grace, not an earning of merit.⁴ This is the fundamental difference between Christianity and other religions.

If a majority of our youth do not understand the truth that lies at the very heart of our faith, then we need to do some serious soul searching and take prompt action. The rest of the article offers some ideas to address this issue. Step one describes the barriers we face, which have caused us to have trouble communicating grace. Step two makes some suggestions about improving the situation.

Barriers to Understanding Grace

1. *Our whole social system is a meritocracy.*

In most societies, everything is judged on merit. Those who get the highest grades and top scores receive praise and honor. The winner of a race receives the gold medal. Wages are based on education, length of service, and performance. In the everyday scheme of school and life, salvation is based on works—"my" works. This fact is explicitly and implicitly taught by society—and young people see this clearly. It seems only natural to apply this system in every area of life—including religion.

But to understand grace we must learn a different system. We have to consciously act in opposition to the principles that apply in most parts of life and learn a new mode of operation. That is not easy. It requires conscious, specific effort because it is like swimming upstream against the current.

2. *Pride and human nature resist the idea*

of grace. From the two-year-old who boldly declares, "Do it *myself!*" to the teen striving for self-identity, people desire to make it on their own. Western culture, especially, glorifies the self-sufficient, independent person. By exalting human independence, we cater to the natural human tendency to prove that humans are capable of managing their

own lives and destiny.

All this makes it hard to acknowledge the need for grace, for it would mean admitting weakness and manifesting a character flaw. To receive grace is even harder. We want to prove we can do it on our own. The grace orientation thus goes against a basic facet of human nature. This fact must be recognized and allowances made for it.

3. *A misunderstanding of grace is prevalent.* Many students, teachers, ministers, and leaders have trouble with a grace orientation because they misunderstand its basic premises. They believe that grace means laxness, absence of discipline or punishment, and low standards. In their view, grace results in a lack of

structure, rules, and regulations. Students often like to promote this, while teachers and administrators dread the results. These ideas are wrong.

Note the biblical teaching on this. Exodus 34:6 and 7, one of the clearest statements of grace in the Old Testament, unequivocally declares God's love, graciousness, compassion, and forgiveness. Yet, verse 7b states, "He does *not* leave the guilty unpunished" (NIV). The punishment goes on to the third and fourth generations. This contrasts, of course, with the thousands of generations to whom God's mercy is extended. However, the guilty *are* punished, which in no way negates grace.

John 3:16 describes God's gracious gift of His Son. The passage goes on to say (verse 18) that whoever believes in this gift is not condemned, but those who do *not* believe are condemned already. Judgment falls on those who fail to believe. Condemnation and judgment are *not* out of line with grace.

The classic New Testament text on grace is Ephesians 2:8, 9 (NIV), "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast." Verse 10 goes on to say, however, that we are created for good works. Doing good things is not in opposition to grace.

What then does it mean to have a grace orientation? A legalistic, righteousness-by-works approach makes good works the *source* of grace, while a grace orientation makes good works the *result or fruit* of grace. Are our students living by God's rules in order to be saved, or because they *already are saved*? Does God accept us because we do good things or are we already accepted by God and therefore try with His help to live a good life? The answers to these questions reveal whether a person really understands grace (and works, as well!).

While the outward behavior produced by these opposing viewpoints may appear the same, the internal feelings and attitudes are miles apart. On the one hand, those working to gain acceptance experience the struggle of trying to earn love and approval. Conversely, those who feel secure in God's love and acceptance respond by trying to live for Him.

A grace orientation does *not* hinge on the presence or absence of certain rules, punishments, or deeds. Instead, it relates to atmosphere, attitudes, reasons, and motivations. What are the reasons for rules, the attitudes toward standards, and the motivation to follow them? This is where a grace orientation stands or falls.

A grace orientation does not mean leaving undisciplined and unpunished all rebellious, law-breaking behavior. It does mean that our aim is not just to change that behavior but also to change the heart. We come to understand that if those rebels in our classrooms really knew about God's unconditional love and acceptance, their hearts and behavior would be transformed.

Paths to a Grace Orientation

Since a grace orientation is central to Christianity and Adventism, but there are barriers to its acceptance, what can we do? How can we make grace real to

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students in Adventist schools? Here are five suggestions:

1. *Grace must be modeled.* Students learn more from our attitudes and outlooks than from what we say. The school and classroom atmosphere we create often has a greater impact than our subject matter. It is not the presence or absence of rules that models grace, but rather the context in which the rules are made and enforced.

Grace means giving love and acceptance freely, whether or not they are deserved. It is these factors that communicate (or fail to communicate) grace at

deep levels.

The issue of warmth in SDA schools has been highlighted by Valuegenesis research. (See Gail Taylor Rice's article in the April-May 1993 issue).⁹ Warmth is closely related to grace, for it results from the experience of grace. People who experience grace tend to give it to others!

This means that how a teacher greets a student the day after he has been disciplined may have more to do with teaching grace than a 50-minute lecture on correct behavior. Giving real responsibility to a troublemaker may teach more about forgiveness than countless proof texts on the subject.

2. *Grace must be explained.* Modeling must be reinforced by explanation. In worship and Bible class, as well as in other situations, grace must be presented as the core of Christian faith.

Shortly after I began teaching on the college level, my interaction with students convinced me that many of them really didn't understand grace. I decided that I would deliberately find a way in each of my religion classes to spend at least one week on the topic, so that every student would hear that message.

Valuegenesis makes it clear that in a general way two-thirds of our students know that Christ saves them.¹⁰ Yet 62 percent believe the way to be accepted by God is to try sincerely to live a good life.¹¹ What this means is that on the general, theoretical side, students believe in grace, but 62 percent lack a crucial *practical and experiential* understanding. Students' progress in understanding is not helped by the fact that 23 percent of their teachers and 39 percent of their parents do not understand grace either! The good news of God's unconditional acceptance needs to be clearly explained—again and again.

3. *Grace must be narrated.* Everyone loves stories, and tales about grace are the best of all stories. Unfortunately, stories are often used only to teach ethics and proper behavior. Uncle Arthur was good at that. There is nothing wrong with stories that teach us to be good, but we must also include stories that teach grace.

One of the most important stories of grace is our own personal experience.

Every teacher who has experienced God's grace should freely share that story with his or her students. This gives grace a real sense of immediacy for students.

Biographies of people, past and present, who have experienced God's grace can be very helpful. At a time when I struggled with the assurance of God's love, John Wesley's biography spoke to me. Sections of it I read time after time.¹²

Many Bible stories speak eloquently of grace. Sometimes we need new eyes to see them that way. Except for Jesus, every Bible heroine and hero had flaws. The Bible is unique among ancient documents in openly discussing the problems of famous people. From Adam and Eve to Abraham and Sarah, from Moses and Zipporah to David and Bathsheba, from Job to Esther, sin is clearly pointed out. In the New Testament Peter and Paul continue the tradition. In these stories we see grace clearly illustrated when God loves, accepts, and uses people in spite of their faults.

I have been fascinated for years by the war stories of the Old Testament. Not the blood and gore, but the strange nature of the battles. Many of them are so ludicrous by worldly standards that they make us laugh. The simple message is that victory comes not by human effort, but by the grace and power of God. Take, for instance, Gideon, his 300 men, and their encounters with the Midianites, or Jehosaphat's episode with Moab and Ammon when the choir leads the way.¹³

All of these stories and more must be told and retold as we celebrate the grace of God. In this way grace becomes part of our story and a vital ingredient of our lives.

4. *Grace must be contrasted.* Truth often becomes clear when contrasted with error. Grace shines more vividly in contrast with its absence.

These comparisons can occur as we look at other religions. Hinduism and Buddhism, which have begun to make an impact on the West, are often condemned as pagan or primitive. However, in their ideal form they are sophisticated, philosophical religious systems. Both incorporate Karma, the law of

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cause and effect, as one of their key doctrines. In their belief, Karma lies behind reincarnation. Everything, including the moral realm, works according to one strict law: You cannot escape the consequences of your deeds.

In many ways this system sounds good. Unfortunately, it leaves no room for grace or forgiveness. One can advance only as a result of doing good works. Christian grace is diametrically opposed to that system. Karma thus makes grace appear all that more wonderful.

We must also seek to highlight the contrast between grace and legalism in concrete situations. A teacher might say, "If we were to deal with this situation strictly on the basis of merit and regulations, I suppose we would. . . . On the other hand, if we want to operate in the light of a grace orientation, we should. . . ."

Grace operates like the waiting father who runs to welcome home his wayward son. In contrast, non-grace operates like the elder brother who begrudges any welcome at all to the wayward one.

5. *Lessons about grace must be repeated.* Since grace contrasts so dramatically with the way much of the world operates as well as with human nature, it must be constantly repeated. The four methods of teaching mentioned above must be used over and over if the message of grace is to be heard and appreciated.

Teaching at a small college in Asia, I sensed a real need to communicate

grace. I didn't have all of the students in my classes, so I decided to hold a series of meetings on Galatians each Wednesday evening for six weeks. All students were required to attend as part of their worship schedule. Each week I talked about grace and salvation in as many ways as I could from that powerful New Testament book. By the end I feared that perhaps everybody was getting tired of hearing about grace.

After the last service a young student came to me with his face aglow. "What a wonderful message this evening," he said. "Why haven't you preached it sooner? It came home clear to me!" I didn't have the heart to tell him that I had been trying my best for six weeks to do so! He had been there but hadn't really "heard" until the last week.

The story of grace is such a powerful, saving one and so important, we must not shrink from telling it over and over again until people really hear. As a result, lives, schools, and churches will be changed and renewed—for that is what grace does. ☞

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Bailey V. Gillespie, "Valuegenesis Report and Future Implications," Unpublished, p. 5.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. For a full development of the place of grace in the Old Testament, see Jon Dybdahl, *Old Testament Grace* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1990).
6. Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1958), Book 1, p. 383. Read this whole section, pages 211-400, especially "Christ Our Righteousness," pp. 350-400.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 384 (italics added).
8. _____, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1940), p. 35. "The principle that man can save himself by his own works lay at the foundation of every heathen religion."
9. Gail Taylor Rice, "Warmth: The Missing Ingredient in Adventist Schools," *The Journal of Adventist Education* 55:4 (April/May 1993), pp. 4-9.
10. Gillespie, p. 6. To the question, "I have a sense of being saved by Christ," 67 percent answered Yes.
11. *Ibid.*
12. A. Skevington Wood, *The Burning Heart* (Exeter-Devon, England: The Paternoster Press, 1967).
13. See Judges 6, 7 and 2 Chronicles 20. For more help see Dybdahl, *Old Testament Grace*, pp. 33-41.