

How does the 21<sup>st</sup> century church understand and dispense grace in a post-Christendom world?

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The church has a substantial problem at present in the institutions of Churches in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Christendom toolbox that the church has been left with is not going to suffice in this age called post-Christendom. Christians are left with a church that is rapidly declining and the church structure that has been left is simply not going to work.<sup>1</sup> In the struggle to grasp the new realities of concepts, the church feels lost and unsure of itself. Some churches have retreated into the safety of its building. Some of these churches have huddled together reminiscing about the days gone by and grieving over the days when the church was in a stronger position.

Christianity in the words of Leonard Sweet in his forward to *the Forgotten Ways* says, 'the Christianity has undergone untold crashes and clashes in the past two thousand years.'<sup>2</sup> Sometimes our hard drives need defragmenting. Data entered onto hard drive is not always entered cleanly and then more files have to be added to keep computers up to date. The more files added the more the hard drive gets scrambled and confused. It therefore slows right down. Many people procrastinate over the defragging process and leave this until the computer is basically ground to halt and crashes, stalled programs and power outages are happening all too often to complete this process. Once complete however the computer is back up to speed and becomes a full speed processor again. The church is at a point in time where the defragging process is taking place in its understanding and dispensing of grace.

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<sup>1</sup> A Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006) p.17

<sup>2</sup> A Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, p.11

While I spent a year in a church in Columbia, Maryland, I was struck by a certain instance that enlightened me to a major flaw in the church's 21<sup>st</sup> century understanding of grace. In our youth group there was one child who was so full life and energy, but he was so full of energy and life that he was sometimes too much for people and annoyed and upset certain members of the Church. I heard one of the more elderly members of our church telling the young boy, "God only likes good little boys." Although this evidence is anecdotal it points us to the truth that we as a church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are unsure of how to dispense God's grace because we do not fully understand it.

The Post-Christendom world is in turmoil. The church is losing its grip on being the anchor that holds this world to the love and grace of Jesus Christ. The roots that were once vast and deep are now weak and venerable. The grace and love of Jesus is the only anchor that can redeem this world. If God is dead everything is justifiable.<sup>3</sup> We focus on the failings of the church or maybe even go as far as to argue for the absence of God. Another revolution could transform the post-Christendom society, and it would be a revolution of grace.

The church has misunderstood the real transformative power and meaning of grace. Swindoll writes 'For too long grace has been misunderstood as punishment avoidance.'<sup>4</sup> But God's grace was flourishing long before the first

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<sup>3</sup> M Lucado, *In the Grip of God's Grace: You Can't Fall Beyond His Love* (London: Word Press, 1996) p.19-20

<sup>4</sup> C Swindoll, *The Grace Awakening* (Milton Keynes: Word Publishing, 1990) p.8

sin was ever committed. The grace crisis has plagued the western church and it is this crisis that we will try and address here. Lets firstly try and address the term itself. You maybe surprised to find that Jesus never actually used the term grace. He just taught it, and more importantly lived it out. Furthermore the bible itself never gives us just one definition for the term, however, it is littered throughout the pages of the bible. <sup>5</sup>

The church has turned inward in its understanding and dispensing of grace. It believes that only place that grace is dispensed is inside the walls of the church and that everything and everyone outside are heathens and don't deserve the grace of God. Yet God gives people a different image of grace when in Matthew he tells the parable of the 'crazy farmer'. The farmer paid all his employees the same whether he employed them at the start of the day or at the end of the day (Matthew 20: 1-16).<sup>6</sup> This divine generosity is one that still scandalizes the church. The second example of a different view of grace can be see in the parable of the prodigal son, when the son arrives home after wasting away half of his father inheritance and even before the father finishes his first sentence he is embraced and loved by the father, yet the older brother after all his years of being good and faithful I appalled at the father foolish love (Luke 15: 11-32). Both of these instances allow us to see how important the role of grace is in the church and how, if understood properly, and dispensed correctly with the love of God, could start a revolution, just like it did in the days of the reformation.

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<sup>5</sup> C Swindoll, *The Grace Awakening*, p.9

<sup>6</sup> B Manning, *The Relentless Tenderness of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Revel, 2004) p.20

## GRACE?- WHO, WHERE, WHAT?

*'Grace is Christianity's best gift to the world, a spiritual nova in our midst exerting a force stronger than vengeance, stronger than racism, stronger than hate'<sup>7</sup> P YANCEY*

*"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in your weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me" (2 Corinthians 12:9)*

In the increasingly graceless culture, where do people find the motivation to understand and accept the concept that grace is a foundation of the Christian faith? Where do people find the motivation to dispense grace, when dispensing grace seems counterintuitive or possibly even futile?<sup>8</sup> This a deeply imperative question that the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has to address if the church is ever to take the message to its roots, conveying a gospel of grace as God intended. Brennan Manning in his book *'The Ragamuffin Gospel'* argues that the church has lost its way in its understanding and dispensing of grace. Manning states, 'The Christian community resembles a Wall Street exchange of works, wherein the elite are honoured and the ordinary ignored. Love is muted, freedom

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<sup>7</sup> P Yancey, *What's so Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) p.30

<sup>8</sup> M Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a culture stripped of grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) p.1-35 This is the question he brings forth in his book.

impeded and self-righteousness secured.’<sup>9</sup> The institutional church has become a wonder of the healers rather than a healer of the wonders.

Manning states, is direct in his words when he says, ‘the American church today accepts grace in theory but denies it in practice.’<sup>10</sup> When Christians observe the fundamental structures of the reality of grace there are tendencies to observe the success and presence of grace by numeration of action and practice rather than by faith instead embracing grace as a business transaction. John Piper continues this sentiment when he describes the relationship between grace and the church. Piper presents his opinion; ‘In the effort to repay God, in the ordinary way we pay our creditors would nullify grace and turn it into a business transaction. If we see acts of obedience as installment payments, we make grace into a mortgage.’<sup>11</sup> It is important not to stray from the fundamental nature of grace; that it is free and abounding to whom ever accepts it. Christians must guard themselves from turning it into a business transaction whereby their works are taken into account in their standing with God. Misinterpretation of grace results on a misinterpretation of the gospel message and God’s intention for Christians.

What can be observed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century church landscape is a Christian spirituality that is centred on self rather than on God and His designed plan of grace and reconciliation with His world. People may discuss about acquiring

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<sup>9</sup>B Manning , *The Ragamuffin Gospel* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2005) p.16

<sup>10</sup> B Manning , *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, 16

<sup>11</sup> J Piper, *The Purifying Power of Living by Faith in Future Grace* (Sisters: Multnomah Publishers, 1995) p.44

virtue as if it were a skill that can be attained like good driving or good knowledge of maths. Though lip service is paid to the gospel of grace, many Christians believe that through self-discipline and self-denial you can mould the perfect 'me'. The emphasis is on what a person can achieve rather than on God's transforming power.

Christians should consider the leading character in Eugene O' Neil's play *The Great God Brown*:

"Why am I afraid to dance, I who love music and rhythm and grace and song and laughter? Why am I afraid to live, I who love life and the beauty of flesh and the living colors of earth and sky and sea? Why am I afraid of love, I who love love? Why am I afraid, I who am not afraid?"<sup>12</sup>

People strive so hard to please God that the existence of the gospel of grace is denied within Christians' lives. The word grace itself has become trite and debased through misuse and overuse. In some European countries the high ecclesiastical offices are called, "Your Grace". Sportswriters speak of Cristiano Ronaldo being the best footballer, "to ever grace a football pitch".<sup>13</sup> Gordon Brown is said to be "lacking in grace".<sup>14</sup> A new perfume comes out called

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<sup>12</sup> <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks04/0400091h.html> 24/2/09

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.cristianoronaldohq.com/biography.php> 26/2/09

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/columnists/concoughlin/3562253/Gordon-Brown-has-lost-Britain-the-ear-of-the-White-House.html> 26/2/09

“Grace”.<sup>15</sup> The word, ‘grace’ is becoming frequently used out of the context of its true meaning, reducing the depth and purity of it in its authentic state. Grace has lost its pure, raw and imaginative power.

In book of Galatians Paul states, ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus’ (Galatians 3: 28). He explains here that there is no one who is outside of God’s grace. There is a certain shock and scandal within the gospel of grace and it is right here at the heart of Paul’s message. Scott McKnight takes this forward when he speaks of people as cracked eikons. He argues that for too long the gospel of grace has been misunderstood as punishment avoidance. God’s grace was flourishing long before the first sin was ever committed and therefore God’s grace is not limited to only include the saints but encompasses sinners also.<sup>16</sup>

When the word grace used within the writings of Paul readers observe that he uses the Greek word *charis*, which had a wide range of meanings in Hellenistic Greek.<sup>17</sup> The early Christians borrowed this word and transformed the term until it took on the character of their belief alone. Paul took an old word and filled it with new content.<sup>18</sup> People such as Brennan Manning and Max Lucado are putting the question to the church, has it gone away from the real meaning of

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.sephora.com/browse/product.jhtml?id=P33801> 26/2/09

<sup>16</sup> S McKnight, *Embracing Grace: A Gospel For All of Us* (London: SPCK, 2005) p.xi-xxi

<sup>17</sup> W. E Vine, *Vines Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (McLean: Macdonald Publishing, 1984) p.509

<sup>18</sup> J Moffat, *Grace in the New Testament* (New York: Ray Long & Richard R Smith Inc., 1932) p.35-70 An argument that he portrays and embraces in his writing.

the word *charis* and returned to a different meaning. If the church has gone away from its root meaning then how does Christians return to the powerful image of grace that is present throughout the word of God and throughout the history of this world.

Lucado notes the following in his book, 'the church has become a judgmental place'.<sup>19</sup> Grace won't fully be received inside the walls. An example would be, a condemned man asked for forgiveness from the church and its leaders. It was declined, but he asked it from the man next to him on the cross and it was granted (Luke 23: 43). A radical shift needs to happen at the heart of our Christian landscape if the church is able to understand, and dispense, the very concept that saved our life. More over that this concept has the power to change and transform lives, namely grace. Van Buren wrote, 'the church is not a museum for saints but a hospital for sinners'.<sup>20</sup> Jesus invited the sinners to his table (Mark 2:13-17); he denied no one the opportunity to join him. No matter how great their sin or how many sins they had committed He invited them to be included. When the gospel of grace transforms a persons life something radical should happen. His eyes should be open to his sinful nature and he should be able to accept his poverty and powerlessness in the eyes of his Saviour. How has the church become so distant from that? The gospel of grace proclaims and acclaims the saints - the perfect - and it denigrates the sinner and the lost.

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<sup>19</sup> M Lucado, *In the Grip of God's Grace*, p.41

<sup>20</sup> [http://thinkexist.com/quotation/a\\_church\\_is\\_a\\_hospital\\_for\\_sinners-not\\_a\\_museum/327520.html](http://thinkexist.com/quotation/a_church_is_a_hospital_for_sinners-not_a_museum/327520.html) 26/2/09

The reformation is an example of a time in Christian History when people were transformed by the essence of grace. Martin Luther was prominent in the process of reforming a corrupt movement into a radically transformative movement. Luther wrestled through several core question's, how could the gospel of Christ be called good news if God is a righteous judge who rewards good and punishes evil? Did Jesus really come to reveal that terrifying message? How could the revelation of God in Christ Jesus accurately be called new since the Old Testament promoted that same message?

Luther broke into the insight of the theological phrase 'justification by grace through faith'.<sup>21</sup> G K Chesterton once called justification by grace through faith, 'the furious love of God'.<sup>22</sup> God is not moody or precocious. God knows no seasons of change. God has a single relentless stance towards us; He loves us. He is the only true God that loves sinners. Many times these truth are too hard for the church to communicate or practice through communities or for Christians to understand as individuals but also to dispense in the wider community.<sup>23</sup> Luther highlighted the wonderful truth that God is righteous and how His righteousness is inputted onto people so that believers are considered righteous

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<sup>21</sup> A McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: Justification Through Faith By Grace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) p.100-109

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.cse.dmu.ac.uk/~mward/gkc/books/diabolist.html> 26/2/09

<sup>23</sup> S McVey, *Grace Walk: What You've Always Wanted in the Christian Life* (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 1995) p.56-65 an overview of his work, his book takes on this concept idea further and at a more personal level.

and blameless in God's sight. It was this wonderful insight in Martin Luther's commentary on Romans that led him to discover both true and active grace.<sup>24</sup>

Robert Capon wrote of the wonderful impact of the Reformation when he recorded,

“The Reformation was a time when men went blind, staggering drunk because they had discovered, in the dusty basement of late medievalism, a whole cellarful of fifteen-hundred-year old, two-hundred-proof grace of bottle after bottle of pure distillate of Scripture, one sip of which would convince anyone that God saved us single handily... Grace has to be drunk straight: no water, no ice, and certainly no ginger ale; neither goodness, nor badness”<sup>25</sup>

It is important to discern here the impact of grace on the whole Christian landscape. Martin Luther rediscovered a truth that would impact his life immeasurably more than he could ever imagine and how that would impact the heart of our faith today. Atkinson in his work on the, *'Martin Luther the Prophet'* describes as 'an instrument of God sent to reform and renew the church.'<sup>26</sup> Luther and the reformation started impacting the understanding of grace and how God justifies sin and a Christian's role in the process of God's grace.

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<sup>24</sup> A McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001) 454-455

<sup>25</sup> R Farrar-Capon, *Between Noon and Three* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982) p.114-115

<sup>26</sup> J Atkinson, *Martin Luther: Prophet to the Church Catholic* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1983) p.216

In the gospel of Matthew an important part of Jesus' passion for sinners can be viewed/observed. Matthew records, 'As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him' (Matthew 9:9). Here a glimpse of God grace through his Son. When Jesus chose his closest twelve men to follow him, he did not choose the Pharisees and Sadducees (the people who were viewed as the religious authorities) but he chose the tax collectors, the street people, the prostitutes and the failures. Even though His reputation was at risk from the bureaucrats who would judge His choice to offer grace and love to the lower class and His belief that these were the people who would shape His message and who His Father called him to save. He reacted vehemently against the bureaucracy and religious zealots of the day. This image of Jesus' all-inclusive grace is given lip service in church but if taken to the heart of the Christian walk then will have a radical effect on the discipleship, ecclesiology and missiology. It is this that will re-write the vision for church but also the churches passion for prodigals.<sup>27</sup>

In a book called '*The Relentless Tenderness of Jesus*' Manning comments on the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16). He states, 'Two thousand years later the Christian community is still scandalized by divine

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<sup>27</sup> H Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: The Story Homecoming* (New York: Image Books, 1992) In this book Henri Nouwen meditates on the story of prodigal son and it allows us to see the importance of this group of people in the missio dei. This book places the prodigals at the heart of the Christian message and impacts the very heart of our Christian understanding.

generosity'.<sup>28</sup> The nature of human self is that people do not like everyone to be let in to the kingdom because of their costly efforts, just like the workers who had been there all day. Some Christians struggle when people give their life on their deathbed because they haven't behaved in a right way for their whole life. The reformation was a time in history when the nature of church was transformed by grace. Grace is the single concept that reconciles Christians with God, the world and each other. Grace materialised for Christians when God incarnate on earth. The church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has a problem in that the church is out of date and out of touch with this grace. It has lost the raw and imaginative power that is held deep within the model of grace.

Paul writes, 'But He (Jesus) said "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in your weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me"' (2 Corinthians 12:9). Until the church admits and embraces that it is a community of sinful individuals, it will always be a place of harsh judgment and will be lacking in grace. Paul also in Corinthians another issue that confronts the failure of the people of God, he said, "my grace is for you". God's will rise out of the church and His grace will cover over our weaknesses. Hans Küng says of a church that does not that it is a group of sinners when he says;

'It deserves neither God's mercy nor man's trust. The church must constantly be aware that its faith is weak, its knowledge is dim, its

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<sup>28</sup> B Manning, *The Relentless Tenderness of Jesus*, p.20

profession of faith halting, there is not a single sin or failing which it has not been guilty of... But if it is constantly aware of its guilt then it can live in joyous awareness of forgiveness.<sup>29</sup>

Justification through faith by grace means we have all been brought into a right relationship with God, an all-inclusive acceptance of Jesus Christ as Saviour. It is from this Christians must search deeper within our faith to gain a wonderful insight through an understanding of grace into God's reconciliation of this world to God, to the world and to each other.

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<sup>29</sup> H Küng, *On Being A Christian* (New York: Doubleday, 1976) p.507-508

## Post-Christendom

*'In post-Christendom, the church is that community of people who look to discover what God is actively doing in the world around them and then join themselves to that work.'*<sup>30</sup> Tim Keel

### Expansion

The presence of religion can be observed in Europe from the beginning of the Roman Empire. It flourished after the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC, as Hellenistic cults competed with Roman deities<sup>31</sup> for the dominant force of the religious era.<sup>32</sup> When the resulting Christianity came into the landscape something dramatically different happened. The world epoch that became known as the era of Christendom<sup>33</sup>, has lasted for many centuries and has become the larger meta-narrative that has shaped the contemporary church throughout the western world, into the church that can be seen today. Carter describes the troublesome relationship between the church and state when he says,

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<sup>30</sup> T Keel, *Intuitive Leadership: Embracing a Paradigm of Narrative, Metaphor, and Chaos* (London: Baker Books, 2007) p.127

<sup>31</sup> P Partner, *Two Thousand Year: The First Millennium: The Birth of Christianity to the Crusades* (London: Granada Media, 1999) p.3-15 has a great overview of this period of history and explains more of the conflict between Hellenistic cults and the Roman deities.

<sup>32</sup> J Luxmoore and Babiuch J, *Rethinking Christendom: Europe's Struggle for Christianity* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2005) p.7-8

<sup>33</sup> S Murray, *Post Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2004) p. 23 here he explains that the phrase was coined in the ninth century.

‘The concept of Western civilization as having a religious arm (the church) and a secular arm (civil government), both of which are united in their adherence to the Christian faith, which is seen as the so-called soul of Europe or the West.’<sup>34</sup>

This description gives insight into how this period had a distinct impact on the Western church. The influence of this instruct relationship can be seen today on the continent of Europe, in its’ beliefs, value and direction. If Christians are to fully understand this epoch that they find themselves in they must reference from a time in history when Christianity was formed. Christianity must pinpoint key moments through history when the meta-narrative disintegrated into history and resulted in a new period known as ‘post-Christendom’.<sup>35</sup>

Christianity must look to ‘the author and perfecter of our faith’ (Hebrews 12:2) for the forward of the narrative of Christendom. Jesus of Nazareth was a Galilean man, nurtured on Jewish scriptures. He came to earth to complete an act of redemption and grace that fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament (Isaiah 22:21-25, Micah 4:1-3). Jesus was revolutionary and came to bring salvation to this world. It is from this foundation that the perspective Christendom must be understood.

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<sup>34</sup> C Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006) p. 14

<sup>35</sup> Frost M, *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christendom Culture* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006) p.1-27 we see in this Chapter entitled ‘Self-Imposed Exiles’, a great explanation of the narrative of Christendom and its collapse.

The first chapter of the narrative of Christendom begins in the fourth century in Rome. Constantine, who played the leader part in the meta-narrative that became an overarching epoch, was born at Naissus in 272 or 273. His father, Constantius was an Augustus (senior emperor) from 305 until his death the following year. At this point Constantine was in York when news of his father's death was brought to him and all of his troops hailed him as the successor to Constantius. Before too much longer Constantine was the master of the Western Provinces and strong enough to attack Rome, where he defeated Maxentius in 312. He went on to become the sole emperor of the West.<sup>36</sup> During a raging battle at Milvian Bridge (on the way to Rome) where Constantine was fighting, there was an unrest causing a shift in political powers, which was the beginning of a huge sociological shift in the place of Christianity, throughout the Roman Empire and the world.<sup>37</sup>

Just before the battle at Milvian Bridge it was reported that Constantine saw the trophy of a cross in the sky above the sun. He was amazed at this miraculous sight, as was his army, who had followed him on the expedition. Under this cross he took the celestial victory and became the first Christian Roman Emperor. A couple of years earlier the church was buckling under the weight of persecution and now through the Edict of Milan<sup>38</sup> persecution of the Christian

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<sup>36</sup> J Comby, *How To Read Christian History: Volume 1 From The Beginning of the Fifteenth Century* (London: SCM Press, 1985) p. 67-71

<sup>37</sup> D Edwards, *Christianity: The First Two Thousand Years* (London, Cassell, 1997) p.70

<sup>38</sup> G Hanks, *Great Events: In the Story of the Church* (Tain: Christian Focused Publications, 2004) p.69-76

faith was outlawed, allowing for the freedom of the faith to be expressed. Constantine promoted the faith and it continued to flourish like never before.<sup>39</sup>

### Impact- heart of Christendom

The high Middle Ages witnessed the flowering of Christendom, as Christianity inspired artists, sculptors, musicians, poets, architects and craftsmen. European history is littered with inspiration of Christianity and the bible-creating framework for literature, theatre, film and daily life.<sup>40</sup> Christendom inspired the buildings and organizing of institutions such as schools, universities, hospitals and other establishments that are now a large part of culture and society. As time passed and challenges came Christendom became a more oppressive and totalitarian religious system in which the church became a wealthy and corrupt movement. No secular ruler could rival the worldwide wealth of the church and its' clergy and so therefore the church held a dominant position of wealth, land ownership and authority. When movements rose up against this corrupt religious system, with its lack of integrity and tainted rulers and authorities, they either persecuted them or treated them as a saint. Francis of Assisi, founder of the Franciscans, was canonized, his near contemporary, Valdes, founder of the Waldensians, was persecuted. This shows a lack of consistency that if the movement did not threaten the system of Christendom then it was praised, but if it did then it was treated with contempt and quashed quickly. The crucial issue within the

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<sup>39</sup> J Hill, *The New Lion Handbook: The History of Christianity* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2007) p.71-77

<sup>40</sup> C G Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001) p.1-15

authorities response to these, 'kingdom movements' was neither belief nor behavior but was centred on belonging. Conformity was an essential precept at the heart of Christendom. In 1229 there is a fascinating example of this when in Toulouse a synod is formed to investigate the discovery and prosecution of heretics.<sup>41</sup>

### Fall Out-disintegration

Conforming to the system resulted in Christians behaving in a way that was expected. Over time, Christians lost their previous close relationship with the state and the church became a separate entity

Many Christians have lived with the deep guilt and heartache over losing this close relationship with the state. There is barely a congregation of Christian organization that has not publicly mourned the diminishing impact of the Christian epoch upon the western society.<sup>42</sup> Many Christians are suggesting a return back to the days of old, where the Christian faith held the centre ground of society and a powerful position in the cultural context of society, culture and media. However this dominant position, the church held within society, had become untenable due to the state and the Church's oppressive regimes. In the sixteenth century many places witnessed the uprising of reformers, like Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin and others. They gained the support of local councils and began to spread their opinion of unrest regarding the

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<sup>41</sup> M Lambert, *The Cathars* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) p.165 A movement based in the south of France and flourished there, gaining considerable support.

<sup>42</sup> Frost M, *Exiles*, p.6-7

relationship between the State and the Church and the began to call for reform of the Church's role within the society and world landscape.<sup>43</sup> Bosch, however contests that the relationship between the Church and the State in the sixteenth century was, 'redefined in a more nuanced way, yet with little fundamental difference. The old, monolithic Christendom merely gave way to different fragments of Christendom.'<sup>44</sup> In this new Church Murray comments that, 'in the mini-Christendoms the Church and the State were more closely linked than ever.'<sup>45</sup>

The evidence shows that this era of Christendom has been in decline in Britain since the 1660's. Bosch notes that Enlightenment had an important part to play in the crumbling of Christendom. He notes that the revival of Cromwell's Commonwealth (1649-1660),<sup>46</sup> which sought a revival of the British Monarchy system because it had become corrupt and lost its place under God's rule, had started the unsettling of the relationship between the church and state.<sup>47</sup> The relationship between the Church and State after Cromwell's revival has begun to become strained. Bosch goes on to say, 'this came sooner in England than any other European country'.<sup>48</sup> Even though the Monarchy was restored in 1660 the damage had been done to its intricate relationship between the State and the

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<sup>43</sup> S Murray, *Post Christendom*, p. 148-149 give a good overview of the role that these reformers played in the wider disintegration of Christendom.

<sup>44</sup> D Bosch, *Witness to the World: The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective* (Basingstoke: Marshalls, p.1980) 120

<sup>45</sup> S Murray, *Post Christendom*, p. 149

<sup>46</sup> Bosch D, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis, 1991) p.274-275

<sup>47</sup> [http://www.forerunner.com/champion/X0004\\_3\\_Oliver\\_Cromwell.html](http://www.forerunner.com/champion/X0004_3_Oliver_Cromwell.html) 6/2/09

<sup>48</sup> Bosch D, *Transforming Mission*, p.274

Church. Chesterton said, “The coziness between the Church and the State is good for the State and bad for the Church.”<sup>49</sup> This co-inter dependence padlocked the Church into a relationship that made the Church itself turn into an emperor and it lost the core of what it was meant to be. The church began to compromise itself in confronting the needs of the poor so that it would not upset its stable, comfortable and dominant position in Western society. During post-Christendom the State and the Church separated the two and allowed culture to be controlled and defined by other influences.

### Impact- legacy

The legacy left by the demise of Christendom can be summarized into three important questions.

Are we seeing the demise of Christendom or Christianity?

Hirsch comments on the opportunities for Christianity to transform and rework itself in the face of this 21<sup>st</sup> century condition that the world lives in. He contests that it will give the Christian faith a chance to re-discover itself in a way that orients itself to face the complex challenges that Christians must face.<sup>50</sup> The larger question Hirsch is challenging Christians to consider is whether people are seeing the demise of Christianity or if it is the disintegration of our

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<sup>49</sup> <http://www.worldofquotes.com/author/G.-K.-Chesterton/1/index.html> 15/7/08

<sup>50</sup> A Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, p.16

Christendom being witnessed. The problem occurs in the fact that the Christendom and Christianity for many centuries have been inseparable and so envisioning the demise of one would also mean the demise of the other. Hirsch argues that demise of Christendom will allow for a discovery of a new birth of Jesus' movements in many different contexts.

Where is God's and His grace in all this?

The story of the tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) gives insight into the judgment and grace of God and the demise of an oppressive system. The demise of Christendom correlation can be drawn between the two that the tower of Babel had, in its confusion, dismay and scattering of people all over the world. As in the tower of Babel and with Christendom, out of the scattering it can be viewed that the seeds of a new phase of Christian engagement with Western culture.

What is the relationship between post-Christendom and post-modernity?

By the 1960's a new factor had emerged and challenged the roots of truth, whether the truth was based on scientific fact or rational thinking or whether it was based on religious truth, it was under suspicion. This time has become known as post-modernity, and its roots can be traced even further back to the

1930's.<sup>51</sup> This elusive concept has been under much discussion and its foundation and impacts are long diagnosed and reassessed frequently.<sup>52</sup> The impact that it has had on Christendom can be viewed and in Murray's words that, 'Enlightenment is a secularized form of Christendom.'<sup>53</sup> Walter Bruggerman writes,

'the unquestionable claims of Christendom were decisively challenged in the rise of Enlightenment rationally... And yet it seems fair to insist that even the Enlightenment was a European affair operated within the confines of Christendom and continued to make absolutists, universal claims.'<sup>54</sup>

Post-modernism not only powerfully challenges Christianity but also gives a vigorous critique of Christendom. It deposes the very heart of Christendom, or its complete domination of values, institutions, authority, social framework and oppressive attitudes. When the framework of Christendom came under scrutiny the cracks began to show and the stress of decades of inflexibility began to become the grand narrative. The institutional nature of Christendom

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<sup>51</sup> S J Grenz, *Primer on the Post-Modern* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) p.57-122 and L Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluarlist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) p. 1-13 both help us see the distinction between faith and values in modernity. Faith and issues of faith were relegated to value. Fact was about what could imperial proven.

<sup>52</sup> C Butler, *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) p.1-12

<sup>53</sup> S Murray, *Post Christendom*, p.182

<sup>54</sup> W Bruggerman, *Cadences of Hope: Preaching Among Exiles* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) p.39

demonstrated inflexibility that redefined dogmatism.<sup>55</sup> Post-modernism offers both challenges and opportunities to the institutions of the church to defragment understanding and dispensation of grace.<sup>56</sup> In contrast however Bolger wrote, 'the Gospel is infinitely translatable.'<sup>57</sup> Christianity is a remarkably adaptable faith and has been transitioned into many cultures and societies throughout many eras. Some may argue against aspects of postmodernity and some may support them but this new era offers Christianity many new possibilities to tell the grand narrative of the mission of God.<sup>58</sup>

These three questions allow Christianity to come to the understanding that Christianity is at a junction between the past and the future. With the church in heavy decline, the church needs to become aware of the culture that the people of God live in, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The challenge, if the church is to adequately bring them the good news of the gospel of grace in this changing and uncertain new era, is to understand the era that we live in and the challenges this give to the churches mission strategy.

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<sup>55</sup> S J Grenz, *Primer on the Post-Modern*, p.17

<sup>56</sup> P Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christians Is Changing and Why?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008) p. 14-16 this shows Christians are in a changing world and need to understand it if we are truly going to be able to bring the good news of grace to this world.

<sup>57</sup> E Gibbs & Bolger R, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Communities in a Post-Modern Culture* (London: SPCK, 2006) p.67

<sup>58</sup> C Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible Grand Narrative* (Nottingham: IVP, 2006) p.45

## The Theology of Grace

*“For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.” 2 Corinthians 1:5*

Luter Jr. writes, ‘nearly two-thirds (100 of 154) of the New Testament occurrences of *charis*, normally translated as “grace”, are found in the Pauline letters. The term is found in all thirteen of the traditional Pauline letters’.<sup>59</sup> There is a heavy cluster of the words *charis* found in Romans and some scholars perceive this as key to our understanding and dispensation of grace. Christians therefore look to the writings of Paul to aid them in their understanding of grace and consider the impact that a deeper and fuller understanding of grace will have on the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century post-Christendom world. There is a considerable challenge for the church in its defining of grace, because to define grace rather than to describe it is challenging. In our attempt to define it scholars tend to fall short of defining and understanding its untamable, unshakeable, unshameable, unapologetic and dangerous characteristics. In reading Romans, the readers are faced with the great challenges of both understanding and dispensing grace in a new era.

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<sup>59</sup> A B Luter Jr ‘Grace’ in G F Hawthorne, Martin R P & Reid D G, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Leicester: IVP, 1993) p.372

The word *charis* carries various uses throughout the New Testament. It can firstly be used to be an object that bestows or occasions pleasure, delight or causes favourable regard.<sup>60</sup> In Luke 2:40 it is applied to the gracefulness of a person. In Luke 4:22 it is applied to speech, “gracious words that came from his lips”. It also can mean on the part of giver, that friendly disposition from which the kindly act precedes (Acts 7:10).<sup>61</sup> The word *charis* is also used to describe the divine favour of God (Acts 14:26), although it can be seen here that stress is placed on freeness and universality of grace.<sup>62</sup> When Christ’s death is considered the meaning of the word *charis* is transformed to mean undeserved favour.<sup>63</sup> It is noteworthy that Paul employs *charis* without exception at the beginning and end of each of his thirteen letters in the New Testament by blessing the reader with *charis*. It can be observed at the start of Paul’s letters that is ‘Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 1:5, 1 Corinthians 1:3, Galatians 1:3).’ At the end Paul usually says something like ‘the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you’ (Galatians 6:18, Ephesians 6:24, 1 Thessalonians 5:28). The unshakable nature of the importance of grace to Paul is demonstrated in his unwavering desire to bless people with grace. He shows this in an unbroken focus at the beginning and end of all his letters.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> I H Marshall (ed), Millard A R (ed), Packer J I (ed) & Wiseman D J (ed), *New Bible Dictionary: 3rd Edition* (IVP: Leicester, 1996) p.433-434

<sup>61</sup> W. E Vine, *Vines Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, p.510

<sup>62</sup> W. E Vine, *Vines Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, p.509

<sup>63</sup> A B Luter Jr ‘Grace’ in G F Hawthorne, Martin R P & Reid D G, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, p.373

<sup>64</sup> J Piper, *The Purifying Power of Living by Faith in Future Grace*, p.65-67

It is to Romans 5:1-10 that we give us insight into the understanding of grace and its dispensation in this new uncertain era. Stott notes here the change in pronoun to the first person plural 'we'.<sup>65</sup> In the first chapter of Romans 1 it is 'I' (Romans 1:16) and in the second half of chapter one it is 'they' when describing the demoralized pagan world (Romans 1:25). In chapter two the writer switches to the pronoun 'you' as he addresses first the moralizer, "You, therefore, have no excuse" (Romans 2:1) and then the Jew, "Now you, if you call yourself a Jew" (Romans 2:17). In chapter three Paul moves onto use the pronoun 'they' describing first the "whole world held accountable to God" (Romans 3:19) and then "all who believe" (Romans 3:22). In chapter four Paul transforms the first person plural and calls us 'all Abraham's offspring' (Romans 4:16) and maintains this throughout the chapter. As he begins chapter 5 he begins with a sequences of 'we' statements, "we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:2) and "we have gained access by faith into this grace" (Romans 5:3).<sup>66</sup> By these magnificent statements of faith we see Paul the apostle identify himself with both Jews and Gentiles, bringing them all under the united banner of this new community under the Messiah Jesus Christ. It is from this background that we read Romans 5: 1-10 and appreciate its impact on grace and how we understand and dispense it.

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<sup>65</sup> J Stott, *The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of Romans* (Leicester: IVP, 1994) p.138

<sup>66</sup> J Stott, *The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of Romans*, p.139

In verse two there is an important truth that will give insight into the understanding of grace and will allow for a fuller and more comprehensive understanding of the role of grace in the reconciliation of believers. Paul confronts an important truth when he wrote, “through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God” (Romans 5:2). Lloyd-Jones comments on the role of grace in our reconciliation to God when he speaks of the tremendous idea of standing in grace when he says

‘We do not shuffle into this grace; we are introduced and presented standing erect upon our feet...You stand in grace you do not slink into it; you do not creep into it; you do not crawl into it! Christ justifies and we walk into his grace; we stand in it.’<sup>67</sup>

Paul emphasizes the heart of God’s grace. Followers of Jesus have been allowed to approach God because of his Grace so it boldly that we stand in presence of God. Many today are scandalized by this grace that allows people to stand in the presence of the almighty God and be considered righteous. Pelikan notes on the work of Luther when he said,

‘The “righteousness of God” that Paul spoke of was not righteousness by which God was righteous in himself because this would passive righteousness. The righteousness by which, for the sake of Jesus

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<sup>67</sup> M Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: Assurance: Exposition of Chapter 5: 1-21* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971) p.41

Christ, God made sinners righteous through the forgiveness of sins, this was active righteousness.<sup>68</sup>

The grace of God is active because God wants to connect with His people; He is offering us through life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the opportunity to walk humbly with Him because of the grace he has give His people.

There is also another important element in verse two, when Paul writes “we have gained access by faith” (Romans 5:2). Our reconciliation with God is dependant on Christ. Jesus is the dearly loved Son of God and humans are in the nature sinners. The Gospel communicates that we are all sinners and its the grace that is spoken of in the Bible is on offer to all creation, because God is involved in the ministry of reconciliation.<sup>69</sup> It is by this grace that we have gained access by faith in Jesus, into a relationship with God. The word ‘access’ can be identified as ‘leading or bringing into the presence of, and denotes the opportunity or freedom to enter through the assistance or favour of another.’<sup>70</sup>

Bruce continues to comment that ‘access denotes the privilege of approaching or being introduced into someone of high station, especially a royal or divine personage.’<sup>71</sup> In Romans five, Paul is teaching the reader that even in our sin and failing, God still allows us access to him. Salvation begins with Christ and excludes the thought that we are in someway deserving of this access by any

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<sup>68</sup> J Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) p.158

<sup>69</sup> R Mackenzie, *Calvin's Commentaries: The Epistles of Paul The Apostle to the Romans and the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1973) p.104

<sup>70</sup> W. E Vine, *Vines Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, p.23

<sup>71</sup> F.F Bruce, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Nottingham: IVP, 1985) p.127

means other than His grace. At the heart of the ministry of reconciliation is the fact that Christ meets us undeservingly and stretches his hand out to us, for our deliverance.

Clark Pinnock comments that a paradigm shift is taking place in evangelical theology. He says that the 'determinist model cannot survive.'<sup>72</sup> He proposes that the old ways of Calvinism has some major flaws. He writes, 'I began to doubt the existence of all-determining fatalistic blueprint for history and to think of God having made us significantly free creatures able to accept or reject his purposes for us.'<sup>73</sup> Here is a challenged laid out to the role of humans in grace and how God is involved in the process of grace. In verse 9-10 we see Paul addressing justification and reconciliation when he writes, "Since we have now been justified by His blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!" (Romans 5:9-10) Thomas Schreiner comments that, 'verses 9-10 return to the theme of hope...Since God demonstrated his love by sending Christ to die for sinners, then it follows that he will see that they are safely persevered.'<sup>74</sup> The return to hope and faith in the

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<sup>72</sup> C H Pinnock 'From Augustine to Arminius: A Pilgrimage in Theology' in C H Pinnock (ed), *A Case for Arminianism: The Grace of God The Will of Man* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989) p.18

<sup>73</sup> C H Pinnock 'From Augustine to Arminius: A Pilgrimage in Theology' in C H Pinnock (ed), *A Case for Arminianism*, p.19

<sup>74</sup> T Schreiner, *An Exegetical Commentary: Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998) p.262

grace of God indicates the importance to Paul of the ministry of reconciliation that God is involved in continually in Christians' lives.

Schaeffer points us to the important of tenses in Romans 5 when he says,

'In the past tense, in real history Jesus died. In the past tense, we accept Him as our Saviour and thus we reconciled to God and became indwelt by the Holy Spirit. On the basis of those events in the past tense, we can have hope in present times.'<sup>75</sup>

Christians are reconciled with God, each other and the world because of the grace shown offered when Jesus died on the cross and it is from this event that Christians should have faith in future grace. Paul ends verse 10 by pointing out Christ isn't dead when he says 'saved by His life' (Romans 5:10). Jesus died for people it is finished work. He died for all the people of God while were still sinners and God's enemies. We can therefore have faith in the hope of future grace because of God's clear and obvious involvement in the ministry of reconciliation.

The word reconciliation has been used in preference to the word justification in the verse 10. Ralph Martins asserts that 'reconciliation is a step up from

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<sup>75</sup> F Schaeffer, *The Finished Work of Christ: Themes from Romans 1-8* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1998) p.136

justification because it involves personal relationship.’<sup>76</sup> In contrast it could be seen that each word on its own is not sufficient to describe the depth and partnership of grace. The two could be both seen as metaphors for describing what God has done through Jesus for His people. Justification emphasizes that believers Christians conduct a righteous relationship with God, while reconciliation stresses that Christians who were formerly enemies of God are now God’s friend. Both of these are blessings for His church and its also calls people to participate in the ministry of reconciliation. Paul emphasises the action needed by people. Paul proclaims this calling when to the church in Corinth. He says, “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.” (2 Corinthians 5:18-19) The call that has been placed on our lives as reconciled people of God is to take the message of grace and reconciliation out to this world. We are in the words of Paul “Ambassadors of Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:20) this means representing Christ in a world that is in need of grace and reconciliation.<sup>77</sup> Being Ambassadors of Christ is not merely the inculcation of doctrine or dogma or the spread of propositions, rather it is the full-fledged acceptance that the church has a role as the people of God. The role of the church is to participate in God’s mission therefore being ambassadors of God’s kingdom and proclaiming the gospel of grace and God’s reconciliation here on earth, calling people back into a full relationship with God,

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<sup>76</sup> R Martin, *Reconciliation: Study of Paul's Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989) p.150-151

<sup>77</sup> H D Trulear ‘Reconciliation’ in A S Moreau (ed), *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* (Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 2000) p.810

people and the world. So part of being reconciled is that we are not just reconciled to God, but we are reconciled in order to be involved in the ministry of reconciliation. This means Christians are reconciled to the world for world and also reconciled to our purposes.

Paul expands on the role of Christ's grace in the believer's life when he says, "For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows" (2 Corinthians 1:5). In relationship with God we are understood to be ragamuffins<sup>78</sup> who without the love of Jesus and His grace are lost and afraid and alone in this broken world. Paul explains that when grace is experienced, it overflows to the rest of the world. What God teaches about grace throughout the Bible is that His central stance towards us is love. He offers grace out upon us. The church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has to recognise that the whole nature of the gospel hinges on grace; Christians should recognise God's grace and the impact it can make when people choose to accept it. The church is a throng of sinners gathered together and yet something has saved them. Christians have been reinstated by grace into a righteous relationship with God. It is the role of the church duty, as weary ragamuffins<sup>79</sup> to dispense grace into the world by both proclaiming the good news of the gospel of grace and by being the hands and feet of God.

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<sup>78</sup> B Manning, *Abba's Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging* (Colorado Springs: Nav Press, 1994) p.3-5 This is name he gives to Christians and one that displays Christians nature as people who are falling short together and live by God's grace.

<sup>79</sup> B Manning, *Abba's Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging*, p.3-5

## Re-Imaging the understanding and dispensing of grace in the new era...

'You've got to get yourself together  
 You've got stuck in a moment  
 And now you can't get out of it  
 Don't say that later will be better  
 Now you're stuck in a moment  
 And you can't get out of it'<sup>80</sup> U2

Something is stirring in the Nevada desert outside of Reno. A movement is gathering force, taking shape and it is not leaving participants untouched. Its influence is affecting the lives of today's generation that is searching for an experience and for meaning in their life in the U.S.A.<sup>81</sup> The Burning Man festival takes place on a 400sq mile flat-floored basin in the blazing heat of what has become known by artists and musicians around the world as the Black Rock Desert. In 2008 it was reported in LA times that 49,599 people attended the event.<sup>82</sup> Each year the event attracts thousands of artists, musicians, bohemians, the punk subculture (which is based around punk-rock), graffiti

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<sup>80</sup> U2, '*Stuck in A Moment You Can't Get Out Of*', from *All that You Can't Leave Behind* (Island Records, 2000)

<sup>81</sup> M Starkey, *God, Sex and Generation X* (London: SPCK, 1997) p. 3-21 This section describes the search for meaning in the life of this generation and its loss of wonder that has been surgically removed.

<sup>82</sup> <http://www.latimes.com/theguide/events-and-festivals/la-gd-burning30-2008aug30,0,1036082.story> 11/9/08 and <http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/2008/index.html> 16/3/09

artists and other artists and subcultures that descend on this playa, in the very heart of the hot, rugged Nevada desert. On the official website it says, 'you belong here and you participate. You're not the weirdest kid in the classroom — there's always somebody there who has thought up something you never even considered. You're there to breathe art.'<sup>83</sup> The festival represents for many a chance to feel accepted and included in a way they experience nowhere else in society. The festival is called the Burning Man, because it builds up to the climax on the Saturday where attendees burn the wicker man that is the central focus of the festival.<sup>84</sup>

Hirsch and Frost argue that the Burning Man, 'represents those trends that pose the greatest challenges to the Christian church. It dares to offer acceptance, community, an experience of God, redemption and atonement.'<sup>85</sup> Hirsch and Frost have suggested that the festival resembles a portion of what the church should offer the people including; authenticity, acceptance, accessibility and transformation.<sup>86</sup> The festival includes or represents many rudiments that Christian communities would consider essential elements, when offering the world the gospel through the perspective of God's grace. It can be seen that people find the transformative power of the Burning Man far removed from what

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<sup>83</sup> [http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about\\_burningman/experience.html](http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/experience.html)  
16/3/09

<sup>84</sup> [http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about\\_burningman/faq\\_what\\_is.html](http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/faq_what_is.html)  
17/9/09

<sup>85</sup> M Frost and Hirsch A, *The Shape of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003) p. 3

<sup>86</sup> M Frost and Hirsch A, *The Shape of Things to Come*, p.2-3

they experience in the church.<sup>87</sup> Although many Christians have been quick to jump up and condemn the Burning Man festival,<sup>88</sup> Hirsch and Frost suggest that Christians should try and observe the reasons why thousands of people flock there to search for an authentic spiritual experience.<sup>89</sup> Hirsch and Frost examine six important elements that make up this postmodern festival belonging,<sup>90</sup> survival,<sup>91</sup> empowerment,<sup>92</sup> sensuality,<sup>93</sup> celebration<sup>94</sup> and liminality.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> <http://www.impactlab.com/2008/06/21/the-transformative-nature-of-burning-man/>  
22/4/09

<sup>88</sup> <http://poweredbychrist.homestead.com/BurningMan.html> 1/4/09

<sup>89</sup> M Frost and Hirsch A, *The Shape of Things to Come*, p.3-4

<sup>90</sup> Belonging is essential to the Burning Man festival. It says on the website 'You belong here and you participate.' In a society that is fractured by rationalism, globalization, racial disunity, fear and violence the Burning Man offers a radical form of welcoming, accepting and comforting community.

[http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about\\_burningman/experience.html](http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/experience.html)  
22/4/09

<sup>91</sup> Survival is essential to the Burning Man Community. This community is centred in the middle of a scorching hot desert; it lacks all the comforts of home, the malls, the restaurants and conditioning. All these are stripped away and you are down to challenged to look deep within yourself to survive.

[http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about\\_burningman/experience.html](http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/experience.html)  
22/4/09

<sup>92</sup> Empowerment is critical in the Burning Man experiment. The website offers this challenge 'you're here to create. Since nobody at Burning Man is a spectator, you're here to build your own new world.'

[http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about\\_burningman/experience.html](http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/experience.html)  
22/4/09

<sup>93</sup> Sensuality is another important element of the Burning Man. The website says 'you're here to experience.'

[http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about\\_burningman/experience.html](http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/experience.html)  
22/4/09

<sup>94</sup> Celebration plays an important part of the Burning Man. The crescendo of the festival is when a wicker Man is burned and the experience is for people to celebrate the wonders of this world in there 'own world.

[http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about\\_burningman/experience.html](http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/experience.html)  
22/4/09

<sup>95</sup> Liminality (a word used by anthropologists to describe the time between childhood and adulthood, but it means transitional and temporary period of human existence) is an important part of the Burning Man. The website describes this when it says 'you'll leave as you came. When you depart from Burning Man, you leave no trace.' The community that's created is created temporary and after it leaves no trace is to be found of its existence.

[http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about\\_burningman/experience.html](http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/experience.html)  
22/4/09

The Burning Man festival is just one example of a new wave of festivals that are taking place all over the world. The experience seeking community offers this postmodern generation a deeper understanding of grace and acceptance in a way that church is struggling to because the Church is still struggling to understand the process of believing, behaving and belonging.<sup>96</sup> The people of God are challenged by the acceptance and passion at a festival like the Burning Man. It is here the Christian community is faced with the simple challenge that Capon Farrar speaks of when he says, ‘the good news is no longer good news, it is okay news. Christianity is no longer life-changing, it is life-enhancing. Jesus doesn’t change people into wide eyed radicals but into nice people.’<sup>97</sup> Has the traditional church begun to settle for an OK gospel? Shane Claiborne calls the problem ‘Spiritual Bulimia’.<sup>98</sup> Bulimia is tragic eating disorder that is associated with image and identity.<sup>99</sup> The Western Church has become Bulimic in its gospel of grace, at times having high regard for certain parts of the bible and lack of regard for other parts. Some have argued that the post-modern churches have sectioned up the bible even more than ‘traditional ones’, doing self-help sermons, and very little on the hard to believe teaching in the word of God.<sup>100</sup> This has us struggling to grapple with what it means to absorb all of the

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<sup>96</sup> S Murray, *Church After Christendom* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2004) p.9-38

<sup>97</sup> R Capon-Farrar, *The Astonished Heart* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996) p.109

<sup>98</sup> S Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as and Ordinary Radical* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2006) p.39

<sup>99</sup> P Claude-Pierre, *The Secret Language of Eating Disorders: How You Can Understand and Work to Cure Anorexia and Bulimia* (New York: Vintage Publishers, 1998) p.32-35

<sup>100</sup> D Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) p.162-177 give an overview of this point of view.

wonderful goodness of the gospel of grace. The symptoms of the Spiritual Bulimia in church can be seen in the way Christians have a consumer mentality towards Christian music and literature, in the words of Claiborne, 'we digest the Christian culture and then sick it up over people.'<sup>101</sup>

The time has come for the church to aspire to reach outside of the norms of the church boundaries and the confines of Christendom to offer something radical. Christians cannot avoid confrontation with our far reaching secular culture. Christians cannot shy away from facing the impending reality that Christians are going to have to step outside the church in mission and meet people with the gospel of grace. In his book *'Everything Must Change'* McLaren discusses the reality that another understanding of Jesus has come to the fore in this world. It is a 'jihadist Jesus that will return to use force, domination, violence and even torture...to vanquish evil and bring peace.'<sup>102</sup> The Church needs to as God challenges people in Mark, "Love your neighbor as yourself. " (Mark 12:31). Christians need to take seriously this challenge and be a people of love rather than of judgment. McLaren continues to say, 'for this Jesus, love and grace- not violence and domination finally win.'<sup>103</sup> Christians need to become more aware to His all-inclusive grace if Christians are to create a community that has trust in the transformative power of the gospel. This is the challenge that the Burning Man festival presents the people of God - acceptance, accessibly and transformation.

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<sup>101</sup> S Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution*, p.40

<sup>102</sup> B McLaren, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises and a Revolution of Hope* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007) p.146

<sup>103</sup> B McLaren, *Everything Must Change*, p.146

God showed people His motivation; He has loved and continues loving us. John 3: 16 is the pinnacle of the revolutionary love it says "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." This is the moment from which God came down to the earth in human form and choose to be grace for all people. Incarnation is fundamental to the churches understanding of both God's and the church's dispensing of grace in the 21<sup>st</sup> century post-Christendom world. David Bosch wrote, 'it should not bother us that during different epochs the Christian faith was perceived and experienced in a new and different ways. The Christian faith is intrinsically incarnational.'<sup>104</sup> If the church is going to dispense grace to this world it needs to recognize that God came to save the entire of creation.

There is an important shift in the last forty years that people must recognize if the body of God is to understand how the church moves forward, adopting a missionary minded approach to understanding and dispensing grace in post-modern era with its new and uncertain future. Guder notes a shift in his important work entitled '*Missional Church*'. The shift that has take place in the world (post-Christendom) has challenged the church to return to the original understanding of the nature, meaning and calling of the church and will have an impact of the church in its practical understanding and dispensation of grace. He notes that mission has not just become an activity of the church, rather mission is a result of the God initiative, entrenched in God's intent to reconcile

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<sup>104</sup> D Bosch, Transforming Mission,p.190-191

and heal creation.<sup>105</sup> Wright states, 'fundamentally, our mission (if it is biblically informed and validated) means our committed participation as God's people, at God's invitation and command, in God's own mission within the history of God's world for the redemption of God's creation.'<sup>106</sup> The *missio dei* began with the Adam and Eve in Eden. It continued with the call of Israel and is present throughout the scriptures; recorded in years of God's involvement with His people. It reached its revelatory pinnacle at the incarnation of God and His work of salvation through the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. In the words of Guder, 'it continues today in the worldwide witness of churches in every culture to the gospel of Jesus Christ.'<sup>107</sup>

If grace is to be dispensed and understood in the way it was in days of Jesus, the church must accept that grace was experienced in common life, around dinner tables, in people's homes and not inside a certain religious building. In his book '*the Forgotten Way*', Hirsch speaks of a return to the apostolic movement of the early church. He notes that, 'sending is embodied and lived out in the missional impulse.'<sup>108</sup> This creates an outwardly mobile movement that is concerned with bringing grace to the lost and broken, therefore a genuine mission impulse one of sending, rather than one of attracting.<sup>109</sup> Christians have to change our mindset from the cheap grace that Dietrich Bonhoeffer confronted so zealously. Bonhoeffer stated that cheap grace was the 'enemy of

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<sup>105</sup> D Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998) p.4

<sup>106</sup> C Wright, *The Mission of God*, p. 22 – 23.

<sup>107</sup> D Guder, *Missional Church*, p.4

<sup>108</sup> A Hirsch, *The Forgotten Way*, p.129

<sup>109</sup> A Hirsch, *The Forgotten Way*, p.129-135

our Church.'<sup>110</sup> Cheap grace is the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner. It allows the church to be passive in its' understanding and dispensation of grace. Cheap grace is grace without the disciplined Christian living. Bonhoeffer offered another type of grace- costly grace. This grace is costly because it calls Christians to follow, and because it allows us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. <sup>111</sup> The costly form of grace is an active form of grace and is the type of grace that requires action as well as transformation. It challenges the church to reactive grace that is at the heart of God's plan for reconciliation.

Hans Kung wrote

'The Church of Jesus Christ is home not only for the morally upright but for the moral failures and for those, who for a variety of reasons, have not been able to honor denominational teaching. The Church is a healing community proclaiming the Father's indiscriminate love and unconditional grace, offering pardon, reconciliation and salvation to the down-trodden and leaving the judgment to God.'<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> D Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London SCM Press, 1948) p.3

<sup>111</sup> D Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, p.4-6

<sup>112</sup> H Kung, *One Being A Christian*, p.525

In this new uncertain era called post-Christendom Christians are witnesses to the evolution of the church resulting from a response to God's grace.<sup>113</sup> Kung informs Christians to the nature of church as a community of broken individuals. Van Buren states, 'hospital for the sinners not a museum for the saints.'<sup>114</sup> Swindoll, in his work on grace, carries forward the theme of the grace awakening and the freedom that this awakening of grace can offer the church. He suggests that the difference between the characters of the early church saints, that were 'adventurous, risk-takers, enthusiastic and authentic',<sup>115</sup> and the modern day church is palpable. He states, "the difference is grace."<sup>116</sup> If grace is fully understood and full dispensation takes place, it would allow dividing walls between people to be knocked down and freedom will reign. Chester and Timmis modeled a new way for the church to practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a church that is centred on the gospel and community.<sup>117</sup> This new era requires a return to the centrality of the ancient gospel and the early church. Stott articulates a view that demonstrates the importance of community in the *missio dei*.

'The church lies at the very centre of the eternal purpose of God. It is not a divine afterthought. It is not an accident of history. On the

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<sup>113</sup> S Murray, *Church After Christendom*, p.96-127 throughout this book he discusses the question of whether the church will emerge or evolve out of post-Christendom.

<sup>114</sup> [http://thinkexist.com/quotation/a\\_church\\_is\\_a\\_hospital\\_for\\_sinners-not\\_a\\_museum/327520.html](http://thinkexist.com/quotation/a_church_is_a_hospital_for_sinners-not_a_museum/327520.html) 26/2/09

<sup>115</sup> C Swindoll, *Grace Awakening*, p.303

<sup>116</sup> C Swindoll, *Grace Awakening*, p.303

<sup>117</sup> T Chester & Timms S, *Total Church: A Radical Reshaping Around Gospel and Community* (Nottingham: IVP, 2007)

contrary, the church is God's new community...that is, to call people out of the world into a people for his glory.'<sup>118</sup>

The church that ignores the call of God and acknowledges the fact that is a group ragamuffin sinners.<sup>119</sup> It will always struggle to realize its call to dispense grace in the world and adopt the role of Jesus, being his hands and feet to the broken

Albert Einstein said, 'We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.'<sup>120</sup> There is truth here that people of God must let grace reign in our church community lives if the people of God are to experience the phenomenal spiritual experiences of the early church, to meet the challenges of this generation and to create the type of experiences they crave for at festivals like the Burning Man festival. The new uncertain epoch the church faces, is one full of fresh new challenges that will need the gospel of grace to be placed at the centre of communities if Christians are to impact this broken world.

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<sup>118</sup> J Stott, *The Living Church* (Nottingham: IVP, 2007) p.19-20

<sup>119</sup> B Manning, *Abba's Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging*, p.3-5

<sup>120</sup> <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/keywords/solve.html> 19/3/09

## Conclusion

If grace is fully understood and fully dispensed within the 21<sup>st</sup> century church it promises to be a radical movement. This can be seen in the words of Paul "my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me" (2 Corinthians 12:9). If God's grace is sufficient for the church, then the people of the church that have been blessed by God's grace will be so moved by the grace of God that their conduct will follow their character. Out of that transformative power, grace experienced will overflow out of this relationship and follow the call that is laid out in the great commission (Matthew 28:16-20).

The church needs to reevaluate the importance of grace and its dispensing if it is to see a return to the days of the reformation. The missional church movement is challenging the 21<sup>st</sup> century church to consider the importance of the understanding and dispensing of grace in the mission of the church. This re-imagining of grace is important if we are to fully be what C T Stubbs called the church to be when he wrote, 'the church is meant to be a 'rescue shop', going to a hurting world with the unimaginably good news of Jesus.'<sup>121</sup> The role of the church in this world is to be the hands and feet of the love and grace of God to a broken world.

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<sup>121</sup> A Hawthorne, *Diary of a Dangerous Vision* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 2004) p.28

Grace is the enabling power of God which, working in humans, performs the divine good will. The church is one means for grace but it needs to recognise that grace is 'the unmerited favour towards man'.<sup>122</sup> It is from this favour that Christians must accept and live out that the grace that has been bestowed on them. The overflow of this grace into the world will allow the church to be what God called it to be.

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<sup>122</sup> J Lawson, *Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980) p.155

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## Other Resources

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