



Grace in Practice: A Theology of Everyday Life

by Paul F. M. Zahl

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■ reviewed by Sally Orwin

G*race in Practice* represents a lifetime of Paul Zahl's captivation with the message of God's one-way love. Zahl is Dean and President of Trinity Episcopal School of Ministry in Pennsylvania and has over thirty years experience of teaching and preaching. To begin with a practical note, the book does not cover everyday life in its entirety and Zahl's aim to explore the connection of grace to 'some' contemporary issues sits uncomfortably with the 'everyday' of the title which suggests a broader sweep than is actually covered. The thread of personal reflection that is woven through the narrative is richer in those areas with which Zahl as pastor and theologian is more familiar. The nature of relationships particularly within the nuclear family and the church, for

example, receives more in-depth treatment than political life. Economic life, including business and work generally, is barely discussed at all. The clear message that does come through, however, and which readers can take away to apply in all spheres of life, is that of applying a theology of grace – grace which engenders what the law demands but is incapable of delivering of itself because law provokes rebellion.

Zahl begins the book by unpacking the theology of grace. The 'big idea' in the Bible, he says, is the relationship of God's law to the self-absorption of the human being. Whilst the law is upright and beautiful, Moses came down from the mountain 'with the truth but not the means with which to apply it' (p. 7). As a result, scripture's meta-narrative is that of human conflict with the divine requirement. Although the law itself is perfectly good and describes the ideal human social environment it consistently produces its opposite.

The Old Testament, Zahl argues, ends in defeat with the prophets 'forced into the corner of speaking grace' (p.9).

Zahl is concerned to counter accusations of antinomianism (lawlessness). Jesus himself did not cast off the law as 'one big and needless inhibitor of human potential' (p. 12) but he recognised the inability of the law to provide its own fulfilment. As a result, it was Jesus who took on God's requirement to answer personally to the law. His death was the victory of substitution, necessary given the total inability of the people oppressed by the law to effect their own freedom.

It is only through the outworkings of this theology of grace that we can effect what looks like the fruit of the law but which the law itself is incapable of delivering. The common theme through chapters 3 and 4 is the exercise of grace in relationships. Zahl looks at grace in families, incorporating singleness, marriage, children,

parents and siblings. He moves on to grace in society, politics, war, criminal justice, social class and materialism. The grace he experiences and seeks to demonstrate in his own life and person as father, son, husband, pastor and theologian is woven into the fabric of the narrative with a humility and honesty which is both authoritative and attractive. The style is conversational and practical suggestions are grounded in reality through the telling of stories, some personal and some lifted from contemporary literature and films.

Grace, he says, depends on the fact that its origin is wholly outside myself. He confronts head-on the profound tensions that exist in the exercise of grace in our lives which continue to be beset by sin. Sin draws us inexorably towards exercising the law in relation to one another while at the same time experiencing the forgiveness of sins, fresh life and salvation in God's grace to ourselves. Zahl is uncompromising, for example, in insisting on equality rather than fairness, gifts rather than entitlement and personal acquiescence rather than the struggle for one's own rights. It is in surrendering to grace that we receive the fruit of a changed life. There is little that is new in these chapters. What is refreshing is the honesty with which Zahl

approaches the reality of everyday life and with which we must confront ourselves.

He looks finally at the implications of a theology of grace for the church. The thesis laid out in chapter 6, 'Grace in Everything', is a radical and controversial critique of the institutional church. Zahl argues that a theologian of grace cannot have an ecclesiology of church: 'The church, being in no sector free from original sin, clings closely to sin and exercises will. This is the will to law, which becomes the will to power. In almost every moment of historical time, the church has come down on grace. It has been fearful of it, competitive with it, and hostile to it. Church is typically the enemy of grace' (p. 253).

We should not be scandalised, he argues, by what he calls the church's radical negation of grace although it is paradoxical that this chapter of the book reads as the most grace-less. The nature of this theological observation about the church appears not to countenance the exercise of grace towards it. The picture of individuals who have turned their back on church and who stand isolated on God's grace is bleak as Zahl argues that 'the world will kill us with just as much effect as the church will kill us. ... This is why I wish to stand in only one

specific place, even if it continually moves. This is the place of God's one-way love and its imputing accuracy, which rescues the human situation in every case where it is given play' (p. 257).

The challenge is to know how we might replicate what he calls the shattering experience that the earliest Christians had in common, an experience of God that was fluid in response to His spirit and grace. The rest of the book points to how we might begin to do this in the relationships of grace that we experience and work out in our everyday lives. This suggests that Zahl's approach to the church is pragmatic rather than cynical. The challenge is whether the church can ever operate out of grace rather than law and the inevitable conclusion from reading Zahl is that it cannot, a hopeless situation which sits uncomfortably with the message of hope intrinsic to the message of grace. The most hopeful reading of this chapter would suggest that Zahl is offering pragmatic observation which would allow for grace to do its work in transforming the people who make up the church regardless of the institution. It is grace, or one-way love, that transforms, enlivens and enables and ultimately produces the fruit which the law demands. ■

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