

EMBRACING

# GRACE

A Gospel for All of Us

SCOT MCKNIGHT



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F O R

*Laura and Mark*  
*Lukas and Annika*



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O God, who wonderfully created,  
and yet more wonderfully restored,  
the dignity of human nature:  
Grant that we may share the divine life of him  
who humbled himself to share our humanity,  
your Son Jesus Christ;  
who lives and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.  
Amen.

Phyllis Tickle

*The Divine Hours: Prayers for Autumn and Wintertime*

Of Man's First Disobedience, and the Fruit  
Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste  
Brought Death into the World, and all our woe,  
With loss of Eden, till one Greater Man  
Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat.

John Milton

*Paradise Lost*

There are two occasions when the sacred beauty  
of Creation becomes dazzlingly apparent, and they occur together.  
One is when we feel our mortal insufficiency to the world,  
and the other is when we feel the world's  
mortal insufficiency to us.

Theologians talk about prevenient grace that precedes grace  
itself and allows us to accept it. I think there must also be a  
prevenient courage that allows us to be brave—that is,  
to acknowledge that there is more beauty than our eyes can bear,  
that previous things have been put into our hands and  
to do nothing to honor them is do great harm.

Marilynne Robinson,  
*Gilead*

To put it another way, if there is no point in the story as a whole,  
there is no point in my own action.  
If the story is meaningless, any action of mine is meaningless.  
. . . so the answer to the question “Who am I?” can only be given  
if we ask “What is my story?” and that can only be answered  
if there is an answer to the further question,  
“What is the whole story of which my story is a part?”

Lesslie Newbigin,  
*The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*

## PROLOGUE

### A Gospel for All of Us

The gospel, above anything else, is the one element of the Christian faith that all Christians can (or should) agree on. After all, it is a gospel *for all of us*—not just for my own segment or your own segment of the Church. It does not belong to one and only one denomination; it belongs to the whole Church. The gospel is the one gift that is for all of us.

Christians today are tired of hearing people announce that one local or denominational church has it all right. We know that none of us has it all right, and we are learning that we need one another. We surely don't agree on everything, but the one thing we can agree on could be the gospel itself.

Many of us today are also tired of “too much talking” and “not enough doing” when it comes to a gospel life. An undeniable feature of the attractiveness of Jesus is that he wasn't distracted by endless debates about theories: he rolled up his sleeves and he invited people to join him in his vision for the kingdom of God. Debates lose much of their heat when you are working side by side with Jesus for the kingdom.

I tell the story of the gospel in what follows, and along the way I tell stories of a variety of persons who discovered that the gospel can soothe suffering and forgive their sins and

restore their community and empower them to work for the good of the world. In other words, they learned that the gospel can satisfy the soul. The only two things, G. K. Chesterton once said, “that can satisfy the soul are a person and a story; and even a story must be about a person.” The gospel is a story about a Person and about persons who find themselves in that story.

In telling stories of the gospel, however, I will not be giving “proofs” of the gospel. The gospel is good enough on its own, and it doesn’t need to be propped up with proofs. Stories are like that. No one needs to prove that *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* or *The Lord of the Rings* or *Charlotte’s Web* are good stories. Read them and you will be drawn in, just as we can be drawn into the gospel story. That is a gift for all of us.

# INTRODUCTION

## The Gospels Among Us

If you ask Christian folk, something I occasionally do just to get a conversation started, “What is the gospel?” you are more than likely to get one of three answers. If you ask the question in a spirit of non-defensive curiosity, you are more than likely to get people to say what they really think. There are three typical answers to the question “What is the gospel?”

First, some say this: “The gospel is that Jesus came to earth to die for my sins so I could be forgiven and go to heaven to be with God for eternity.” Most of the time those who give this answer to the question also provide a quotation from the Gospel of John or from Paul’s letter to the Roman Christians.

Second, others say this: “The gospel is the Good News that Jesus came to liberate us from oppression, from systemic evil, from slavery, so there would be justice and peace.” I also hear this one quite often, and these people tend to quote a line or two from Jesus’ well-known inaugural sermon in Luke chapter four or from the prophet Micah.

Third, another group says something like this: “The gospel is being part of the Church.” Again, this group will sometimes quote a Bible verse, but they are just as likely to quote their

pastor or priest and say that they grew up in the Church and that this is what they were taught.

There is no reason here to figure “which group is giving which answer?” or to start pointing fingers at one another. And there is no reason to start claiming that “my gospel is better than your gospel.” Instead, there is every reason for us to ask how we got ourselves into this muddle: how, we can be asking, could we have such different approaches to what is so basic? If the gospel is for all of us, how did it come to pass that each group thinks it alone has the gospel figured out? One group emphasizes forgiveness of sins, another the transformation of persons and society, and the other our inclusion in the community of faith. Is there a right and a wrong with these answers?

*The most important thing I have to say in Embracing Grace is this:* each of these groups is trying to say the same thing, each of these groups is right in what they do say about the gospel, and each of these groups needs the definition of the other. But first we need to define the gospel groups.

## SO WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

*Embracing Grace* is written because of my experiences teaching in churches across the United States and in classrooms with students who come to my school (North Park University) from a variety of backgrounds. Each semester in

my classes I have students who are Protestant, who are Roman Catholic, and who are Eastern Orthodox. I have students who are charismatic, who are liturgical, and those who don't know what either of those terms means. I've done my best to listen to them and to get these students to engage Christians from other traditions, and I've always asked them to look again at the Bible to see what it says about the gospel. *Embracing Grace* flows from this interaction.

It is my conviction that God designed the gospel to be a source of communion for all Christians and not a source of division among them. But this communion can emerge only if we respect one another enough to listen to what the other is saying, and if we go back to the Bible *together* to see what the gospel really is. So, how would I define the gospel?

*The gospel is the work of God to restore humans to union with God and communion with others, in the context of a community, for the good of others and the world.* This is what I call the gospel of “embracing grace.” In this book we will look at each element of this definition, tweaking it here and there with special words. This is a general summary of a gospel *for all of us*. It tells the story of a God who embraces us in spite of who we are and what we have done; it tells us that God's embrace enables us to embrace God back and to embrace others, and that this double embrace is intended for the good of others and the world. This grace comes to us in Jesus

Christ, in his death and resurrection, and in the gift of the Holy Spirit.

So, when I use “embracing grace” in this book, I am referring to the unleashing of an endless cycle of grace that can end what Philip Yancey calls the “cycle of ungrace” in our hearts and world. Here is the flow of grace:

God embraces you and me and  
God embraces others and  
God embraces the whole created order.

Then:

You and I embrace God back and  
We embrace others and  
We embrace the entire created order.

The gospel is designed to create this cycle of grace. Each of the “gospels” among us that we have just mentioned focuses on one element of the definition above or on one element or more of the cycle of grace, but each of those gospels could benefit from listening to the others. Indeed, the gospel is about forgiveness, about justice, and about the community of faith. And it is about each of them, together.

*Embracing Grace* invites each of us to listen to one another and prays that in listening we will learn from one another and grow into a deeper unity.

EMBRACING GRACE



# 1

## PERFORMING THE GOSPEL

THE GOSPEL IS MORE LIKE A PIECE OF MUSIC to be performed than a list of ideas to endorse. Embracing grace invites us to listen to each line of the gospel creed, digest each line, and then transform the lines into a life lived in the here and now. Thus, it is a gospel that is both proclaimed *and* performed. The first without the latter is hypocrisy; the second without the first is not the gospel. But, together they tell God's story so satisfyingly that others are compelled to join along.

Jesus entered into Galilee and gave himself as a person to love and as a life to be followed. The doctrines, which clearly were involved, flowed out of the love and the following. To claim that the gospel is more than a creed does not diminish creeds but puts them in their proper place. Whether we look at Jesus' message of the kingdom or the apostle Paul's glorious theology of grace, each is designed to transform life as it is lived in the here and now. Jesus measured people by how they lived because he was concerned with character. In fact, how a person lived showed what they really believed. "[B]y their fruit," Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "you will know them."

Sometimes I ask students to read the prophets after they have read Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul articulates theology and the prophets inform us that theology isn't what it is supposed to be until it is lived. Of course, Paul says this, too, but sometimes it takes time with a prophet to know what the apostle is saying.

## A STORY WE PERFORM

A lot of people in this world are looking for a place where the gospel of embracing grace transcends proclamation and becomes performance, and when they see it performed, they join in. Why? Because when the gospel is embodied it tells the gospel story better than anything Hollywood can flash on

the screen and better than any novelist can put on paper. The reason the gospel has been around as long as it has been, besides Providence itself, is that it tells our story better than we can tell our own.

But people today don't want either a glitzy or a tame gospel. Ordinary, perhaps; but tame, no. We don't mind being told that the gospel story can be like Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, a story in which an ordinary pastor passes an ordinary life with ordinary people and wants to tell his son about his ordinary story. Nor do we mind being told that the gospel can be as difficult as Ernest Hemingway's character Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea*, who finally catches the big fish, but by the time he gets home he only has the story to tell rather than the big fish to sell—or eat or show off!

Furthermore, we don't want to be told that the gospel will all of a sudden solve all our problems and make the world shine its happy face on us from sunup to sundown. We don't want anyone to tell us a gospel like this because we know it isn't true. And we don't want to be told that the gospel is about being nice to one another, or that if we sit down for a little conference on peace, the world will be a better place. New winds are blowing, and these winds are asking the Church for a gospel that not only forgives my sin but also works for justice and peace and does so in a meaningful

community where we both hear about and experience the love Jesus called his followers to have.

This generation wants an authentic gospel, one that is both proclamation and performance, a gospel that deals with the world they live in: a world that is full of images of people dying and starving and being put to death by goons, a world where there is a profusion of tensions, a world where the Christian faith isn't the only faith in town, a world where one particular denomination doesn't own the market on everything, a world where neighborhoods don't look like the one in *The Waltons*. An authentic gospel creates, as Pastor John Burke says so well in his *No Perfect People Allowed*, a culture where you come as you are and drop phoniness and pretense as you pass through the doors. Such a culture, he contends, is one of trust, of tolerance, of truth, one that takes persons in who are broken and alone. No wonder attendance at Burke's Gateway Church has skyrocketed.

A come-as-you-are culture, within the walls of the Church, as Burke describes it, will develop permeable walls. Such walls don't separate between believers and unbelievers, but invite everyone to come to the table to listen to Jesus. Such walls don't separate between denominations, between young and old, between the poor and the wealthy, between the morally struggling and good old-fashioned upright people, between men and women, between ethnic groups and cultural climates.

Instead, permeable walls permit entrance and exit without notice and without judgment. A come-as-you-are culture is not indiscriminate, but it creates a church where grace is the ruling paradigm. It asks people to tell their story and promises them safety and love. When permeable walls are found, honesty is found—sometimes frank, but honesty nonetheless. Permeable walls may be walls, but you don't know they are there.

This generation—the sort of people you and I pass on the road in our commutes or bump into in the aisles at the grocery store or who may go to bed cold and lonely, or who wake up one morning to cancer or to someone's tragic death or who live their three score and ten—this generation doesn't want something that tells them that everything is good. It wants something more and won't settle for anything less. I sense an impatience with the Church's neat divisions into denominations and an urgency to start something new. This generation doesn't want to attend church in nice clothes, drop some small-numbered bills into the collection plate, sing “When the roll is called up yonder I'll be there,” and go home—that is, after a nice meal at a nice restaurant. And it really doesn't care what the church calls itself or what denomination it belongs to.

A stronger way of saying it is this: this generation is challenging the Church to perform what it proclaims, or, to use less elegant language, to put up or shut up.

What this generation is asking to see proclaimed by performance is grace.

People today want to get to the bottom of things, in fact to the bottom of their own things. They want something that finds what is really there and tells them there is a way for what is really there to be restored to what it once was or what it can be. They want something that speaks to their condition and that can set them free from the chaos this world confronts them with. They want something that will draw them closer to God and to others and lead them to a life that is good for the world. And they want to both hear it and see it.

This come-as-you-are generation wants to see if the Church really does love them.

## PATRICK OF IRELAND

One of the most compelling pictures of a live-it-out gospel is the story of Saint Patrick of Ireland. When a teenager, the son of a wealthy and powerful Christian pillar of a community in Britain, Patrick was kidnapped. His dream of a life of fame and wealth was jolted in the middle of the night by voices and weapons and threats. He was gagged and wrapped in chains. Then he and others in the household were marched in the dead of night to a waiting boat. Each of those captured was summarily evaluated in a cold-blooded triage, and some, because they were deemed useless to the mission, were put to

death in the sight of the young man, searing his mind with images too vivid to allow sleep. Patrick himself survived the triage only because he was robust enough for farming.

Forced into a boat and taken into exile in a foreign country, Patrick became the slave of a sheep farmer for six years. Reared in a wealthy home and promised a noble future, he found himself laboring on a primitive farm in a foreign country. Instead of a future, Patrick had a past. But, in that exile this is what he wrote: “But it was here . . . that God first opened my heart. . . . God used the time to shape and mold me into something better. He made me into what I am now—someone very different from what I once was, someone who can care about others and work to help them. Before I was a slave, I didn’t even care about myself.” Patrick found his story in God’s embracing grace.

As a slave with plenty of time to reflect on the meaning of life, Patrick reclaimed the Christian faith he had recently renounced for atheism. He began to rise early to say his prayers fastidiously, and he began a lifelong practice of fasting. He used his time tending sheep for prayer and for reciting the Bible stories he had learned as a child. Before long, Patrick the slave was being called “holy boy.” So intense were his prayers that he received a vision: in his dream God told him that he would be going home soon and that a boat was ready. That boat, however, was some two hundred miles away.

Somehow Patrick escaped, shrewdly found passage across the sea, and wended his way back to his home and his family. There he had yet another dream in which God spoke to him. Only this time the dream involved a call to return to the land of his slavery to preach the gospel and establish churches. His family thought he was crazy, but Patrick went anyway (after a brief theological education).

In that land of Hibernia, Patrick, a freshly anointed preacher, and his growing number of fellow Christians established church after church through both proclamation of the simple truth and performance of the simple life in a community. Leader after leader embraced the gospel, and community after community experienced its restoring powers. The marginalized, especially women, found meaning and were empowered by the story of God's embracing grace. Patrick ministered to the whole person—heart, soul, mind, and body. This revival under Patrick occurred in the fifth century AD. His parish was northern Ireland. Today we call him St. Patrick of Ireland, and the whole church claims Patrick because his was an authentic, credible gospel.

## CHURCHES PERFORM THE GOSPEL

We don't get to choose between performing or not performing the gospel.

A local church *always* performs the gospel it proclaims. This may sound odd, so let me emphasize the word “always.” A church *always* performs the gospel it proclaims because its performance is its proclamation. If you look at a church and what it does and how it operates you will *see* the gospel of that church. The important point to make here is that the deepest indicator of that church’s gospel cannot be limited to the pastor’s sermons, or the Sunday school teachers’ teaching, or the doctrinal statement’s affirmations, or the summer camp offerings, or the aesthetic expressions. The sure indicator of the gospel in a local community is how those Christians live.

If the local church is loving or unloving, or if it responds to the community’s needs or doesn’t even know about them, or if it is as racially mixed as the community or if it has only one racial make-up in an multi-ethnic community, or if it has great music and splendidly dressed pastors, or if it has lots of rules to follow and lines to sign, then that is what the church is actually preaching.

The performed gospel is the gospel the local community proclaims. *Always*. Which is why a church like NorthBridge, on the border of Illinois and Wisconsin, is making an impact in its community.

## NORTHBRIDGE

Tucked into a public building at the corner of highways 173 and 83 in Antioch, Illinois, is NorthBridge Church. The pastor is Mark Albrecht and the worship leader is his wife, Michelle. NorthBridge is a new faith community, and so it has faced all the usual issues, including that of building a facility. But, instead of spending their funds right away to construct a building, the people chose a different option. The money given in many local churches is nearly exhausted by building expenses, salaries, and fees, with very little (if any) left for the community. But NorthBridge's people did something else: they tilted their ears to see if there were needs they could attend to. That is where they began.

When Mark, along with other church leaders in the area, heard about the financial crisis in the Grass Lake school district, Mark approached the Superintendent, Jim Beveridge, and asked what they could do. Jim informed Mark that an old school building did not meet the building code and was no longer usable, and that it would cost over a quarter of a million dollars to rehabilitate it. The district needed that building. Mark and the leaders convened, prayed, and came up with a plan: they decided to fix the building, not by hiring it out, but with volunteer labor from their own church and other communities of faith in the area. Together—a word local

churches often struggle with—they fixed that old building, and the costs were about a tenth of the original estimate because of volunteer labor.

Church work and community work, forgiveness of sins and justice, and gospel ministry and social ministry got all wound up into one effort. Instead of concentrating on “church work,” instead of pouring scorn on the local school administrators, instead of family frustration leading to a move to another town, instead of raising funds for another private Christian school, these churches entered the public square and did what they could to help—and they got “nothing” out of it. Giving is like that.

They also got nothing out of ShareFest, another community event they orchestrated. Several in NorthBridge discovered a bundle of needs, most of them unmet and low on someone’s priority list. They organized ShareFest. Junior and Senior high school students painted 557 fire hydrants, others painted a public works building, some winterized and restored senior citizens’ homes. Others worked in the local wetlands. They held a clothing and food drive and a blood drive, as well as a musical performance. Albrecht was quoted in the local *Antioch Press*: “We went out and asked, ‘How can we help?’ It was kind of revolutionary.” ShareFest ended with a community-wide celebration service, in which all the pastors and congregations participated. Proclamation led to

performance, and the proclamation was made credible *because* it was performed.

Mark Albrecht and NorthBridge are not doing this alone; they do not want attention. Pastor Albrecht simply wants to see the story of embracing grace performed at NorthBridge Church for the good of Antioch and the glory of God. It is exciting work, and many other churches, both old and new, are catching a new vision of the old gospel story, the gospel preached by Patrick and the gospel performed in Antioch.

## SOLOMON'S PORCH

This is why I find an avant-garde church in Minneapolis, Solomon's Porch, so suggestive of what the local church can be. I am not suggesting that other churches are not just as suggestive, for I have given and will give other churches as examples. The pastor—and “pastor” is too strong a term for his liking—of Solomon's Porch, Doug Pagitt, decided to write up what goes on in this innovative faith community over the period of a week, and the narrative of *Reimagining Spiritual Formation* unfolds a multitude of ideas and provocative suggestions for what the church could be in a local community.

What I like most about Solomon's Porch is that it has as its goal the formation of a community that embodies the gospel. Here's how Pagitt says it: “To be honest, the legitimacy of

what we're doing at Solomon's Porch will be best judged in 15 to 20 years. . . . The question that haunts me is not, 'Do people like our church?' but 'Is there any real formation happening?' Two decades from now, will our efforts at human formation be shown to have contributed to the lives we have led for the past 20 years? . . . When we move beyond belief-based faith to life-lived, holistic faith, the only true test is lives lived over time."

Proclamation and performance of an authentic gospel combine into credibility.

# 2

## THE BEGINNING OF THE GOSPEL

THE GOSPEL BEGINS AT THE BIBLE'S BEGINNING. If we fail to begin there, we will miss the gospel.

Genesis 1:1 tells us that God created the heavens and the earth, and in the next verse that the cosmos was *tohu va-bohu*, “a formless void.” Then God’s (Michelangelo-like) finger reaches out, touches the swirling and whirling chaos of *tohu va-bohu*, and turns it all into order. Chaotic commotion becomes ordered motion. Part of turning the *tohu va-bohu* into order, in fact the apex of God’s order-making, is creating man and woman, Adam and Eve. They appear on the last day of God’s creative work. For them God prepared a little world called Eden and asked them to take care of it.

Plenty of Christians worry about whether or not the early chapters of Genesis are straightforward history or not, and some even speculate on the DNA of Adam and Eve. What is more important about Adam and Eve for *Embracing Grace* is not their DNA but that they were made in the image of God, what I will call the *Eikon* of God. This is where the gospel begins.

### EIKONS OF GOD

Only after God made Adam and Eve did God say, “This is very good.” The stupendous element about Adam and Eve is that they were made, according to Genesis chapter one, “in our [God’s] *image*, according to our *likeness*.” Genesis was originally written in Hebrew and then much later translated into Greek. The Hebrew word translated as “image” is *tselem*, and the Greek translation is *Eikon*. I will use *Eikon* throughout *Embracing Grace* since “image of God,” the more customary Christian expression, has been over-used and become diluted by academic debates. (And the word *tselem* hasn’t caught on.)

Most of us connect to the term *Eikon*. Many of us will think of “icons” on computer screens. When we click on them we enter another screen. Others will think of the “icons” in Orthodox churches or in the museums of this world. They, too, are designed by their creators to lead us into something else—in this case to God. I will use *Eikon* because,

since it is rarely used, it gives us a new term to think with. By using a new term we will be able to fill it with its own meaning.

When God made humans, he gave them hearts, souls, minds, bodies, and wills to make them *individuals*; God gave them other individuals just like themselves so they could live in *community*; and he gave them a *world* in which to live. Into this world God set Adam and Eve to be Eikons, to be visible bodies that reflect the glory of God. As the *Westminster Larger Catechism* put it so well in the opening question:

1. What is the chief and highest end [goal] of man  
[humans]?

A: Man's chief and highest end is *to glorify God*, and fully to enjoy him forever.

John Piper, pastor and theologian, suggested that “*and fully to enjoy him forever*” be changed to “*by enjoying him forever.*” God's joy is ours and ours is God's.

As Eikons of God, God has given us the opportunity to explore the world. For us to do this God gave us two gifts: *freedom* and *relationships with others*. Freedom, the freedom to do or not to do what God said, is inherent to being human. In addition to giving us freedom, God made more than one person, creating both male and female, so people would learn to love one another. So relationship is also inherent to what

it means to be an Eikon of God. The Genesis account tells that after God made Adam he said, “It is not good that the man should be alone.” Humans, both Adams and Eves, are designed for relationships. Those relationships are Godward (loving God) and otherward (loving others), and both are to occur within the world in which we live (loving creation).

Here then we have the context of being an Eikon of God: we are individuals who are inherently like God and like one another so we can love God and love others, and we are to do all this in the place where God puts us—right here on earth, and for its good. The eighth Psalm says this beautifully: “what are human beings that you are mindful of them? . . . Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands.”

*The gospel is about every one of these dimensions of human life—the human’s relationship to herself and himself, to God, to others, and to the world and to the society in which we live. That gospel begins when we realize, as Mister Rogers did, that humans are special.*

## MEET MISTER FRED ROGERS

When my children were young they loved to watch *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, so Kris and I frequently watched Mister Rogers with them. His slow pace was accompanied by chatter

about feelings and that it is all right to have such feelings. I thought he had some quirky manners, and I didn't care much for his funky shoes and old-fashioned cardigan. We knew at the time that Fred Rogers was an ordained Presbyterian minister, but I confess I was at times put off by his constant mantra about being "you" or being "special." But I was wrong. Fred Rogers was seeking to instill into children something integral to the entire sweep of Christian theology: that humans are Eikons of God, special, and capable of *being* a message. As Bob Faw on the NBC *Nightly News* reported after Fred Rogers died, "The real Mister Rogers never preached, [never] even mentioned God [on his show]. He never had to."

No one has told the story of Fred Rogers better than Amy Hollingsworth. An only child, "Fat Freddy" Rogers was weak and got picked on. So he played alone. He learned to express his negative feelings about life through piano playing and puppet characters. His personal experiences along with his study of psychology and theology filled him with a unique capacity to understand the inner world of children, and he sensed that children needed help—which they did and still do and always will.

In seminary, Fred Rogers learned that there are two kinds of Christian leaders: "accusers" and "advocates." He chose to be the latter, and this explains why his life was a story of embracing grace. What buoyed up his choice of being an