### Charis, Hesed, Law and Grace

**Peter Nathan**

**November/December 2014**

 One result of the Protestant Reformation, in which many “daughter” churches broke away from their Roman Catholic parent, is that Protestants have almost universally accepted Martin Luther’s idea that God’s grace functions in opposition to His law.

 Martin Luther was a considerable scholar who knew Scripture well, and had written commentaries on Genesis and the Psalms in which he had to deal with the subject of grace, so—although he should have known better—he was well able to present his deception very convincingly, establishing what has come to be an enduring fiction.

It particularly suited Luther’s theological ends, especially his interpretation of the Book of Galatians, to establish this idea of opposition. An example of his approach is provided from Luther’s Lectures on Galatians:

“Therefore I admonish you, especially those of you who are to become instructors of consciences, as well as each of you individually, that you exercise yourselves by study, by reading, by meditation, and by prayer, so that in temptation you will be able to instruct consciences, both your own and others, console them, and take them from the Law to grace, from active righteousness to passive righteousness, in short, from Moses to Christ. In affliction and in the conflict of conscience it is the devil’s habit to frighten us with the Law and to set against us the consciousness of sin, our wicked past, the wrath and judgment of God, hell and eternal death, so that thus he may drive us into despair, subject us to himself, and pluck us from Christ.” (Luther’s Work Volume 26, J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, eds., p. 1535. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House. 1999).

We read the consequence of this opposition every time we read John 1:17 in the Authorised Version or the NKJV, or even some of the more recent translations such as the NET Bible: “For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17, NKJV).

Notice that the conjunction, “but,” is in italics—indicating that the translators added the word to provide meaning. Even in modern versions that omit “but,” the translators use a semicolon or colon to separate the thoughts, hence maintaining Luther’s concept of opposition. In reality, however, the two phrases should be taken in parallel:

“God gave the law through Moses,” **and**

“God gave grace and truth through Jesus Christ.”

Our Heavenly Father gave both, such that the two phrases represent a **progression** rather than an **opposition** of ideas. This verse is also the culmination and result of a thought that John was inspired to write: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). This is an important verse to which we will return.

**Luther’s Fiction**

Listen to almost any preacher on radio or television today, and you will hear a view on Law and Grace that comes right out of Luther’s teachings. “The Law is done away,” they say, “and we are now under Grace.” Bible dictionaries and study aids also continue to perpetuate the error. One of the most complete Bible dictionaries, published in English in 1964, the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, states this in its entry for grace (charis) as used in John 1:14 and 17: “The Johannine writings very seldom use the word group.… Paul’s antithesis of grace and Law is adopted, but it is not developed. The statement is unique in John’s Gospel” (Kittel, G., Bromiley, et al. p. 399).

Despite his role in perpetuating this fiction, Luther was **not** the first to misunderstand grace. The Apostles and leaders in the early Church had to contend with those who misunderstood or misused the concept of grace. This is why Jude notes: “For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the **grace** of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ” (Jude 4).

Jude’s statement is very instructive. He tells us that a misuse or misunderstanding of grace leads to a denial or trivialization of the role of Jesus Christ. As we look further at the subject of grace, we will be able to appreciate Jude’s statement even more profoundly.

The Apostle Paul also had to teach the brethren about this same concept. Speaking to the congregation in Rome, he questioned the association of grace and lawlessness. “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that **grace** may abound?” (Romans 6:1). A few verses later, Paul made it clear that Christians are not to be servants of sin—lawlessness—now that we are under grace. The common Protestant view today is that Paul believed those under grace need not keep God’s law. But what he is actually telling us is that grace annuls the penalty of death associated with breaking ­the law—sin. We read  “For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not! Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one’s slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness? But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered” (Romans 6:14–17).

Interestingly, Paul used the Greek term charis—grace—three times in this section; verses 14, 15 and 17, though the last instance is not translated as grace in the NKJV. In fact, very few English translations even try to incorporate the idea of grace in translating the verse, opting instead for some use of “thanks” as has the NKJV.

**Old Testament vs. New?**

The end result of Luther’s approach to law and grace was to enshrine within Protestantism a sense of opposition between the Old and New Testaments. The consequence was that the Old Testament was not seen as a source for understanding concepts that the New conveyed. Grace was seen as a New Testament subject, and was interpreted according to the Greek usage of the term.

Because of Luther’s influence, few Bible students have looked closely enough at the term grace. In his teaching, Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong used the definition of “unmerited, undeserved pardon” for the New Testament term “grace” or the Greek term charis. The basis for such definition is the Greek usage: “In the singular, charis can also mean ‘gracious disposition’” (Kittel,p. 375).

Interestingly, however, unlike Protestant theologians, Mr. Armstrong did not stop there. He felt the need to explicate more than was given by standard definitions; for instance:

“The word ‘grace’ means unmerited, undeserved pardon! God pardons those who repent! And ‘repent’ means to turn from rebellion, hostility, disobedience. ‘Repent’ means to turn to obedience to God’s law. The fact that God chooses not to give this wonderful gift—the gift of immortality, which carries with it divine power—to those who would misuse it for harm and evil; the fact that He chooses to give it only to those who will rightly use it—does not mean it comes by works instead of grace. If there were no conditions, then everyone could demand it—and it would be received as a right by birth, instead of by grace!

The very fact of grace makes necessary God’s required qualifications. But it still is an undeserved gift!” (The United States and British Commonwealth in Prophecy, Worldwide Church of God, 1980).

Mr. Armstrong realized that three important aspects were not included in the standard Greek usage of the term: (1) the continuing application of God’s law, leading to (2) repentance and the necessity of it, and (3) recognition of grace as applied in the pages of the Old Testament as well as New!

Dr. Meredith has produced Tomorrow’s World programs on this subject, in which he has addressed the continuing opposition of law and grace as “one of the most deceptive and destructive misconceptions in the world today. Did Christ’s sacrifice do away with God’s laws, or is there a truth that involves both the grace of God and the law? Get your Bible and listen today” (“Law or Grace?” T111). Mr. Richard Ames has spoken recently on this subject in a sermon sent to Living Church of God congregations in 2013 (“Living Grace,” DVE697).

**Hesed, Charis and Grace**

In John 1:14, Jesus is described as coming “full of grace and truth.” To the Apostle John, these were elements of God’s holy and righteous character, exemplified in the life and conduct of Jesus Christ. If Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8), this grace would have been part of His character before He became a human being. The unchangeable nature of the character of the Being who became Jesus Christ was told in Malachi 3:6.

So, it is quite remarkable that historic and linguistic studies could lead scholars to make a statement utterly foreign to prior Protestant theology: “…the concept of grace never breaks out of the framework of the Law; on the contrary, it constitutes a sharpening of the Torah” (Kittel, p. 387). *[similarly with scholars such as Bahnsen, Rushdoony etc - Craig]*

How did this recognition come about, after centuries under the shadow of Luther’s fiction?

The Hebrew word that is so important in terms of the correct Scriptural understanding of grace is the term hesed—sometimes transliterated as chesed. Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words indicates that it can be translated as: “loving-kindness; steadfast love; grace; mercy; faithfulness; goodness; devotion.” However, for most of us who use the NKJV, hesed is most often translated into English as “lovingkindness,” a term that Miles Coverdale first used in his translation in the 16th century (Sakenfeld, Katharine Doob. The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry. p. 17). The ASV, NAS and Darby translations follow Coverdale almost exclusively. So, the meaning and full import of grace in both the Old and New Testaments has been clouded to most since the reformation.

What can we learn from the term hesed?

One of the earliest usages is by Abraham’s servant, Eliezer, when he was sent to find a wife for Isaac. He realized that he needed the Eternal’s hesed (“kindness,” Genesis 24:12) to be applied so that the faithfulness of Abraham could be honored.

Moses used this term to show the great action of the Eternal in delivering Israel from captivity in Egypt. “You in Your **mercy (hesed)** have led forth the people whom You have redeemed; You have guided them in Your strength to Your holy habitation” (Exodus 15:13).

Perhaps most surprisingly for all is the usage of hesed as part of the Ten Commandments. The use of this appears twice, directly in the second command and implied in the first command. In instructing Israel not to make images, the Eternal tells them that He applies hesed to those who keep His commandments. The NKJV expresses this as “mercy” in Exodus 20:6. The first command has an expression of the Eternal’s hesed for Israel. We often read the first commandment as “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Exodus 20:3), but the preceding verse is part as well. Verse 3 and following verses are to be the response of Israel to what the Eternal has already graciously done for them in bringing them out of the land of Egypt and the bondage they suffered there. Moses has already described that act as one of hesed or, for us, grace.

Moses also learned and recorded for us details of the Eternal’s hesed when he spent time on Mount Sinai. Moses desired to see the Being with whom he dealt, but was told he could not see the Eternal’s face. Then the Eternal revealed his spiritual character to Moses in Exodus 34:6–7.

The Apostle John wrote: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, **full of grace and truth**” (John 1:14). Here, John describes Christ’s nature by hearkening back to an Old Testament phrase that was used to describe the One who gave the tablets of the Ten Commandments: “And the Lord passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and **abounding in goodness [hesed] and truth**” (Exodus 34:6).

Thus we see the connection between the Hebrew word hesed (translated here as “goodness”) and the Greek charis, also meaning “grace.”

So, to say that Jesus came full of grace and truth, is to say that this had always been His character and by extension the character of His Father.

So Israel was delivered by a Being who was characterized by grace and truth—a fact that helps us see how grace is essential to all the workings of the God family with the creation. It is an essential part even of the law of God. So law and grace can never be considered to be in opposition. Martin Luther’s understanding, and that proclaimed by so many religious broadcasters today, was—and remains—totally wrong.

It is worth considering again the statement of Jude. He stated that by misusing or misinterpreting grace, individuals deny or trivialize our Savior Jesus Christ, highlighting how lost and deceived this world remains to this concept. How grateful we should be for having been provided with a proper appreciation of godly grace.

**No Conflict Between Grace and Law**

Let us return to the Old Testament for a moment before we finish. Here is a concise statement provided by one writer who has studied the application of hesed closely. Consider how her statements apply equally to those whom the Father has called to be in a relationship with His Son.

“The term hesed thus proves to be one which throughout the Bible was remarkably rich in its theological meaning. Here the sovereign freedom of God and his strong commitment to his chosen people were held together in a single word. A single word expressed the utter dependence of the people upon [the Eternal] and his willingness and ability to deliver them. A single word communicated the promised faithfulness of God upon which the people could base their cry for help and the surprising faithfulness of God which transcended even his own declarations of judgment upon his people. God preserved the covenant community even in its failure, in accordance with his own commitment to the people—a sure and everlasting hesed, great beyond any human expectation.

And so Israel could proclaim in varied forms throughout her history: ‘Praise [the Eternal], for he is good for his hesed endures forever’ (Psalm 107.1)” (ibid., pp. 238–239).

Speaking of the Psalms, one of those we have in our hymnal is the most concentrated exposition of hesed within God’s word. Psalm 136 in the English speaks of God’s mercy. Every verse extolls that virtue of our Creator. In actuality, the Hebrew term that is translated as mercy, is not the Hebrew for mercy at all, but rather hesed. In that single Psalm we have 26 distinct occasions on which the Eternal provided hesed—grace to His people Israel to whom was given the law and who were supposed to be law-abiding.

The apostles and writers of the New Testament had no problem seeing that the grace of our Father and His Son were consistent throughout the entirety of the Bible. Those that the God family worked with were always subject to grace. Notice the warning given by Paul about our ability to fall short and reject the grace offered to us. The first example of a person who lost contact with grace is Esau, who failed to appreciate his birthright and sold it for a bowl of potage. To Paul his failure to appreciate the grace of God was cause for his rejection (Hebrews 12:14–17). Just as Jude warned, Esau, an Old Testament individual, trivialized the grace shown to him.

Bearing that warning in mind, Paul concluded that section of his writing with this admonition; an admonition that holds as true today for us as it did for the Church in the first century: “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear” (Hebrews 12:28).

Where does this leave us? We serve a Being who has not changed in His character. We have a situation where the One who gave the law to Moses was the gracious One—a Being characterized by grace and truth. The giving of that law was an act of grace, so that grace and law can never be in opposition to one another as Luther claimed. We need to see the Father  and Christ as Beings characterized by grace, and that all of their actions toward us are acts of incredible grace.