

**Because we cannot make ourselves subject to the law of God, we cannot repent unless God grants us that ability.**



# Understanding the Scope of the Grace of CHRIST

There is danger in trusting in the false gospel of works.

By Donald P. Olsen

**F**ew doctrines are as well supported in scripture yet as thoroughly misunderstood by Latter-day Saints as the doctrine of the grace of Christ. While many Mormons believe the gift of the resurrection comes by the grace of Christ, few consider grace to be sufficient apart from works to obtain eternal life. Indeed, Elder Bruce R. McConkie has recently labelled salvation by “grace alone without works” as the “second greatest heresy” of Christendom, saying the doctrine originated in the “courts of darkness” and “is akin to what Lucifer proposed” in heaven.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, members seldom speak of grace in church meetings.

In contrast, the word *grace* occurs 128 times in the New Testament, where it is translated from the Greek word *χαριτι* (kahar-i-ti), meaning an undeserved favor, an unearned blessing, a free gift (i.e., not one given as payment or reward for obedience and good works). In addition, the term *δωρον* (dor-on) also means gift and is used in connection with grace and the Atonement. The Book of Mormon uses the word *grace* only 20 times but makes many other references to the concept of grace. The Doctrine and Covenants repeatedly uses the term. At least 20 LDS hymns contain the word. These references to grace in the standard works present a view which, while not often heard among Mormons, enlarges considerably the scope of the grace of Christ.

## THE STATE OF MAN

In the scriptures, the concept of grace is closely related to teachings concerning the state of man: Humankind requires grace because they are in a lost, fallen, and corrupt state, incapable of regaining God's presence without divine intervention. While Latter-day Saints sometimes associate this idea with apostate Christendom, it is nevertheless taught in the standard works. For example, in the Book of Mormon King Benjamin proclaims that the “natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam” (Mosiah 3:19). Alma clarifies this notion when he states that “man became lost forever, yea, they became fallen man. . . . and the fall had brought upon all mankind a spiritual death as well as a temporal. . . . they had become carnal, sensual, and devilish, by nature. . . . And now, there was no means to reclaim men from this fallen state, which man had brought

upon himself because of his own disobedience.” (Alma 42:6-12.) Alma's discussion of “our first parents” makes it clear that man's carnal nature arises not through individual sin but as a consequence of Adam's fall (42:7). Moreover, this fallen state is not a product of man's upbringing but is part of his “nature”—an inevitable, natural result of being the offspring of Adam (42:9-10).

Paul writes of Adam that “by one man's disobedience many were made sinners” (Rom. 5:19). Paul further asserts that “the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.” (Rom. 8:7-8.) The Book of Mormon missionary Aaron carries this idea even further, saying that “since man had fallen he could not merit anything of himself” (Alma 22:14). Perhaps this is what Isaiah has in mind when he says, “All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags” (Isa. 64:6).

In at least one way, the person under sin is not free. The bonds of justice prevent him from obtaining forgiveness of sins, righteousness, acceptable works, and eternal life. Paul alludes to this condition when he writes, “I am carnal, sold under sin” (Rom. 7:14). Paul also states that those who accept the gospel are “delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21). Alma seems to be referring to this slavery when he talks of being “in the grasp of justice” (Alma 42:14).

## THE FUTILITY OF WORKS

Not recognizing his innate bondage, man has vainly attempted to break the grip of justice and create a relationship with God through systems of obedience to law, ritual, mysticism, or good works. While all of these approaches have their strengths, they simply cannot achieve a reconciliation of man to God. A good example is the law of Moses, which had as its hallmarks obedience and ritual. Paul extols its value when he writes, “the law is holy . . . and just and good” (Rom. 7:12) and elsewhere adds, “if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law” (Gal. 3:21). Unfortunately, no law, not even the law of Moses, provides a way to remove the effects of sin. Nephi

**The person who trusts in obedience to law believes in a false gospel, is foolish, cursed, and fallen from grace.**

makes this point when he says, “by the law no flesh is justified; or, by the law men are cut off” (2 Ne. 2:5).

This does not mean the law was useless, however. Abinadi teaches his people that the Mosaic system provides a foreshadowing of Christ who will redeem man from sin (Mosiah 16:14-15). Paul explains that the law was a “school master to bring us unto Christ” (Gal. 3:24). He also observes that the law was given so “that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful” (Rom. 7:13) and that “all the world may become guilty before God. . . for by the law is the knowledge of sin.” (Rom. 3:19-20.) In other words, the law brings awareness of and responsibility for our sins and errors.

Nonetheless, misplaced devotion to law will sever us from the grace of Christ. Paul points this out in his letter to the Galatians, who believed circumcision and the law of Moses to be necessary augmentations of the gospel. In part, he accuses them of having “removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ into another gospel” (Gal. 1:6-8). He insists that those who rely on “the works of the law are under a curse” (3:10) and that those who seek to be “justified by the law . . . are fallen from grace” (5:4). Thus the person who trusts in obedience to law to any extent believes in a false gospel, is foolish, cursed, and fallen from grace.

The scriptures seem to categorically exclude works as a means of obtaining forgiveness and reconciliation with God. Paul explains that

*if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God. . . . Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, saying, blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin. (Rom. 4:2-8.)*

Paul clinches his argument by asking whether Abraham was justified before or after he was circumcised. He answers *before* (Rom. 4:10).

The mutual exclusiveness of grace and works as a basis for receiving blessings is further brought out by Paul when he says, “if [election is] by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work.” (Rom. 11:6.)

How then should we view our works? Even though Paul, referring to his background, says, “after the most straitest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee” (Acts 26:5) and calls his “righteousness which is in the law, blameless” (Phil. 3:6), he nevertheless chooses to “count them but dung” (3:8). This is not to suggest good works have no place, only that individuals cannot earn or activate a relationship with God through them.

In seeming contrast, a common Latter-day

Saint aphorism states that “obedience is the first law of heaven.” This is probably based on Joseph Smith’s instruction that “there is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundation of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated—And when we obtain any blessing from God it is by obedience to the law upon which it is predicated.” (D&C 130:20-21.) At first it might appear that these verses vindicate the value of obedience or works in obtaining God’s favor. However, it is important to note the use of the singular article *a* preceding the phrase “law irrevocably decreed.” This indicates that our success or failure in obtaining blessings from God depends entirely upon our obedience to *one* law. Paul speaks of two laws, namely, the law of faith and the law of works (Rom. 3:27). Justice can only be satisfied by faith in the righteousness of Christ or by lifelong, sinless obedience to the whole law of Moses. Since the latter is impossible, our only hope is to trust in the grace of Christ by obeying the law of faith.

Thus, people must look to Christ and not to the law (or any set of laws) or their own good works for their redemption. Righteousness, justification, sanctification, salvation, eternal life, and a relationship with God can be received only and wholly through the grace of Christ.

#### JUSTIFICATION

Apostle Bruce McConkie, one of the few LDS authors to publish an interpretation of the law of justification, writes that “an act that is justified by the Spirit is one that is sealed by the Holy Spirit of Promise, or in other words ratified and approved by the Holy Ghost.” That is, “no unrighteous performance will be binding on earth and in heaven, and . . . no person will add to his position or glory in the hereafter by gaining an unearned blessing.” Finally, Elder McConkie teaches that justification “becomes operative in the life of an individual only on conditions of personal righteousness.”<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, however, the scriptures appear to teach a different doctrine. In the New Testament, the word *justification* is translated from the Greek *δικαιωσις* (*dik-ah-yos-in’*), which has two distinct meanings. The first is the achieving of personal righteousness by virtue of perfect sinlessness. The second is imputed righteousness by virtue of the transfer of righteousness through declaration. That Paul intends the latter meaning is clear from his use of the word *ελογισθη* (*el-og’-is’tha*) (to impute, reckon, attribute, or put on account) in the same context (Rom. 4:6, 22-25). Thus, justification refers to the attributing of Christ’s righteousness to the undeserving sinner so that he appears righteous to God.

Developing this teaching, Paul observes that “by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. . . by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous.” (Rom. 5:18-19.) Isaiah shows an understanding

of this process when he records, "In the LORD I have righteousness. . . . In the LORD shall all the seed of Israel be justified" (Isa. 45:24-25). This justification comes "through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past" (Rom. 3:24-25). In other words, because Christ has fully paid for past sins in the garden and on the cross, the justified sinner is not accountable for them. And just as Christ's righteousness is imputed to sinners, so mankind's sins are imputed to Christ: "[God] hath made [Christ] to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor. 5:21).

How is justification received? The scriptures show that this state is made available, received, and activated only through grace. For example, the Doctrine and Covenants teaches that "we believe that justification through the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is just and true" (D&C 20:30; see also Rom. 3:24). However, the fact that grace is an undeserved favor freely given does not mean justification is unconditional. First one must believe that justification is by the grace of Christ. As Paul puts it, "by [Christ] all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses" (Acts 13:39; see also Rom. 3:20; Gal. 2:16). Christ clearly sets forth this view when his disciples ask, "What shall we do that we might work the works of God? Jesus answered and said unto them, this is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent." (John 6:28-29.) Thus, belief in Christ is the work of God. Nevertheless, faith is real only if it leads to repentance and baptism for the remission of sins (Acts 2:37-38). Finally, one is justified by the Holy Ghost (Moses 6:60; 1 Cor. 6:11). Thus in becoming justified, one will comply with the principles stated in the fourth article of faith.

Not only does justification come by grace through this process, but even the ability and motivation to have faith, repent, be baptized, and receive the Holy Ghost must also come by grace. The Doctrine and Covenants explains that faith is a gift from God (D&C 46:11-14). Christ makes this clear when he says, "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him" (John 6:44). Later he comments, "no man can come unto me except it were given unto him of my Father" (John 6:65; 6:37; 17:2). Paul teaches that "as many as were ordained to eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48). Thus those who possess faith sufficient for eternal life (as well as justification) receive that faith by the grace and will of God.

Furthermore, Paul even asserts that the carnal man cannot repent unless God wills it. Because the carnally minded cannot make themselves subject to the law of God, they are unable to repent unless God grants them that ability (Rom. 8:7-8). Perhaps this is why Luke writes,

"Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18).

Even the good work of baptism cannot be done by oneself. The candidate must receive this ordinance from God's priesthood holder, who acts as a proxy for Christ by authority which is available only through grace. The same is true for the act of confirmation. Thus, the ordinances of baptism and confirmation are received wholly through the grace of Christ.

This helps us understand what Nephi means when he addresses himself to those who have just received Christ (that is, the newly justified): "Ye have not come thus far save it were by the word of Christ with unshaken faith in him, relying wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save" (2 Ne. 31:19). As with Paul, Nephi implies this justification is received only when we rely "wholly upon the merits" of Christ—not upon our personal works or worthiness.

### SANCTIFICATION

The term *sanctification* is used two ways in scripture. Often it is synonymous with *justification*. In these instances, sanctification is said to be received through "the blood of the Lamb" (Alma 13:11-12), "the reception of the Holy Ghost" (3 Ne. 27:19-21), "by the grace of God" (Moro. 10:32-33), "through the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (D&C 20:31), "by the Spirit" (D&C 84:33), "in Christ Jesus" (1 Cor. 1:2), "through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ" (Heb. 10:10), "with his own blood" (Heb. 13:12), and "by God" (Jude 1).<sup>3</sup>

Another, less frequent, usage of *sanctification* refers to a state of holiness or righteousness in behavior and thought. In this context, individuals are considered "sanctified by that [law of the Church] which ye have received" (D&C 43:9) or are told to sanctify themselves (D&C 43:11, 16; 133:4, 62).

In the first usage, each of the scriptures clearly speaks of the sanctification which is received by the grace of God. The second refers to the righteous behavior of the Christian. Yet it is important to note that in either case this state is attained through the grace of Christ. The personal righteousness of the justified person is motivated by God. Moroni teaches that even those who are cleansed (i.e., justified and therefore in the process of sanctification) are "relying alone upon the merits of Christ" (Moro. 6:4). Thus sanctification does not come as the result of personal merit, but is the means by which personal merit is obtained.

An apparent contradiction arises in the Doctrine and Covenants, which observes that "sanctification through the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is just and true, to all those who love and serve God with all their mights, minds, and strength" (D&C 20:31). While this seems to make sanctification dependent upon both service and grace, it is important to realize that service is not counted for righteousness

**The scriptures seem to categorically exclude works as a means of obtaining forgiveness and reconciliation with God.**

unless it is motivated by the grace of Christ. This is explained by Moroni, who writes that unless a person's works originate with Christ, such works are "not counted unto him for righteousness" (Moro. 7:3-12). Thus, in the justified person, both sanctification and acceptable service arise out of Christ's free gift of grace.

### SALVATION

Traditionally, Latter-day Saints use the term *salvation* to refer to the resurrection. Yet this is not consistent with many scriptures. In his letter to the Ephesian Saints, Paul explains that "by grace (*Χαριτι*) are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift (*δωρον*) of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast." (Eph. 2:8-10.) Significantly, Paul uses the perfect passive tense (*σέσωσμενοι*) of the word *save*. This means that Paul believed his readers already possessed salvation. Clearly he is not referring to the resurrection with this term, for the Ephesians were not yet resurrected. Furthermore, the listing of faith as a prerequisite for salvation also precludes this interpretation.

This passage seems inconsistent with the traditional LDS views of the role of individual works. Elder McConkie suggests that the phrase "not of works" excludes only the works of the law of Moses, not the "higher works of the gospel."<sup>4</sup> But Paul excludes all works from consideration by using the phrase "lest any man should boast." Boasting is discouraged only when all personal works are excluded from the criteria for obtaining salvation. Furthermore, Paul's use of the term *Χαριτι* for *grace* and the term *δωρον* for *gift* emphasizes the free nature of salvation thereby precluding any dependence upon any works. Paul summarizes God's sovereignty in salvation when he says "God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth" (2 Thes. 2:13).

Most Mormons take exception to the notion that grace is sufficient for receiving salvation, citing Nephi's teaching that "we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do" (2 Ne. 25:23). From this they infer that we must do all that is possible for us to do in order to be saved by grace. There are several problems with this view. First, this interpretation is inconsistent with the definition of grace as a free gift. Second, such a view contradicts many other scriptures, including many Book of Mormon statements. Nephi's father, for example, teaches that "salvation is free" (2 Ne. 2:4). And his brother Jacob urges the Nephites to "remember, after ye are reconciled unto God, that it is *only* in and through the grace of God that ye are saved" (2 Ne. 10:24, emphasis added).

In addition, this interpretation fails to ask what is "all we can do"? Except for Christ, no one has ever done literally all that he could do. It must therefore be asked whether *all* means all

works and righteousness or whether it limits the set of things required for salvation. Nephi outlines the prerequisites to reconciliation or justification as faith, repentance, baptism, receiving the Holy Ghost, and continuing in faith to retain that state (2 Ne. 31:14-17). Thus, this is "all we can do."

Finally, it is important to consider the context of this scripture. In making his controversial observation, Nephi urges the people to keep the law of Moses even though the law was dead due to their belief in Christ (2 Ne. 25:24). That is, the law was irrelevant to salvation except insofar as it pointed them to Christ. Therefore it appears that Nephi was deemphasizing, not emphasizing, works. Perhaps he was trying to say that even if we do everything possible to try to merit salvation, we still can't earn it; we must still receive it on an unmerited basis (i.e., by grace). In other words, we are saved by grace *in spite of*, not *in addition to* all we can do.

### ETERNAL LIFE

Justification leads to sanctification which in turn leads to eternal life. This was summarized by Paul when he taught that "as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 5:21). Thus, even eternal life is an unmerited gift of God: Paul teaches "the gift (*Χαρισμα*) of God is eternal life" (Rom. 6:23). The Doctrine and Covenants echoes this doctrine, observing that "eternal life . . . is the greatest of all the gifts of God" (D&C 14:7).

### THE ROLE OF WORKS

If justification, sanctification, salvation, and even eternal life are free gifts, what then is the purpose, value, and role of works? The scriptures teach that acceptable good works are the *result*—not the *cause*—of the grace of Christ operating in our lives. Paul remarks that God has foreordained the works to be done by each Christian when he says, "We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). Similarly, Peter says that we are "elect . . . through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience" (1 Pet. 1:2). Paul again emphasizes this concept when he writes, "it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). Or, as he writes elsewhere, "God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work" (2 Cor. 9:8).

Even Christ acknowledges God as the source of his power and works when he says to Phillip, "Believest thou not that I am in the Father and the Father in me? The words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself: but the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works. . . . Verily, verily, I say unto you he that believeth on me,

**Because Christ has paid for past sins in the garden and on the cross, the justified sinner is not accountable for them.**

the works that I do shall he do also." (John 14:10-12.) Perhaps Moroni makes the most sweeping statement on this subject when he writes, "Wherefore, all things which are good cometh of God and that which is evil cometh of the devil. . . . But behold, that which is of God inviteth and enticeth to do good continually. . . . and all things which are good cometh of Christ." (Moro. 7:12-24.)

If good works neither earn Christ's grace nor win us justification, sanctification, salvation, or eternal life, what do they do? Christ said, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). Therefore our good works set an example for others which brings men to Christ and provides happiness to ourselves and others.

The true purpose of works is an important key in understanding certain teachings of James concerning justification by works (James 2:24). Contrary to popular Mormon belief, this scriptural discussion of works does not refer to justification before God. For example, James writes, "Show me thy faith. . . . and I will shew thee my faith" (2:18), and "Seest thou how faith wrought" (2:22). Such statements refer to works seen by men and do not address God's response to those works. Thus, the justification of which James speaks is the demonstration of good works to show men the existence of true faith.

These verses are further clarified by James's observations about Abraham. He states that Abraham was "justified by works, when he had offered Isaac" (2:21), but later says that the patriarch "believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness" (2:23). James's reference for Abraham's belief is Genesis 15:6, while the story of sacrificing Isaac is found in Genesis 22. In other words, Abraham was *first* justified by his faith, which *afterwards* brought forth good works. These good works continued up to at least fifteen years later, when Abraham was asked to sacrifice Isaac.

There are, of course, many references to the role of works in the final judgment. John, for example, beheld that the dead were "judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. . . . and they were judged every man according to their works." (Rev. 20:12-13.) At first this seems inconsistent with the doctrine of salvation by grace apart from works. However, the inconsistency is only apparent: The dead spoken of here are those who will be resurrected at the end of the millennium. These are the unjust who have not received the grace of Christ. Those who have received grace and thus salvation have already been resurrected: Verses four to six which describe the judgment of the saved, make no mention of the effect of works upon their status.

But what of the references which state that those who inherit celestial glory are judged on

the basis of works? Since these people have had the righteousness of Christ imputed to them, it seems reasonable to suppose that the good works which determine their favorable judgment are the works of Christ, not those of the individuals who received this gift. Paul refers to this transfer of righteous works when he writes, "They which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ. . . . by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. . . . by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous" (Rom. 5:17-19; see also 2 Cor. 5:21). Therefore Christ provides our good works.

## CONCLUSION

Those who haven't received the grace of Christ or have tried to augment it with their own obedience and good works will find that their "righteousnesses are as filthy rags." Many Mormons appear to have fallen prey to trusting in this false gospel of works. The words of Paul concerning those without grace can in many cases be applied to these Latter-day Saints: "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved. For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth." (Rom. 10:1-4.)

On the other hand, those who truly have the grace of Christ have faith unto repentance, receive baptism and the Holy Ghost, are justified, are in the process of becoming sanctified, have received salvation from sin, and may have received eternal life. These blessings will be theirs so long as they do not fall from grace by trusting in good works or by attempting to earn, merit, or deserve these blessings. Those who continue in grace will someday stand before God where Christ will plead their case saying to the Father, "I am their righteousness; I have paid justice for their sins." Then God will see only the good works of Christ and say to them, "Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."

DONALD P. OLSEN holds a Ph.D. from Purdue University and is a systems engineer for the Aerospace Corporation of Los Angeles.

## NOTES

1. Bruce R. McConkie, "What Think Ye of Salvation by Grace?" BYU devotional address, 10 January 1984.
2. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2d ed. rev. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Bookcraft, 1966), p. 408.
3. See also Moses 6:60; 1 Cor. 1:2, 30; 6:11; 1 Thes. 5:23; 2 Thes. 2:13; 5:23; Heb. 13:12; 1 Pet. 1:2.
4. Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, [1965]-73), 2:500.

The scriptures teach that acceptable good works are the result—not the cause—of the grace of Christ operating in our lives.