LOSE THAT YOU MAY FIND

Lose that You may Find
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“O come O come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here, Until the Son of God appear. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.”

"You are a Christian only so long as you constantly pose critical questions to the society you live in . . . so long as you stay unsatisfied with the status quo and keep saying a new world is yet to come.” – Henry Nouwen

1. Reflections on money, sex and power

I recently purchased a second-hand copy of Richard Foster's book, *The Challenge of the Disciplined Life: Christian Reflections on Money, Sex & Power.* First published in 1985, Foster's work was originally titled as, *Money, Sex & Power.* The original title conveys a rather provocative, "in your face" tone. The revised title however, better links Foster's text to the greater theme of his life's work and message. Foster sought to help Evangelicals appreciate the enduring relevancy of historically enduring spiritual disciplines found within and across the greater Christian Tradition. The broader concern of Foster's text is Christian ethics; how Christians should develop and make ethical or moral choices, regarding issues of money, sex and power. Foster is not suggesting that money, sex and power are inherently evil. On the contrary! Foster is rather warning us that this is a triad of social arenas that are polluted and enslaved by very real "principalities and powers" (e.g. Ephesians 6:12; Colossians 1:16); powers such as greed, lust, and pride.

Foster begins by describing the inseparable links between money, sex, and power. In their unredeemed state, "Money manifests itself as power. Sex is used to acquire both money and power. And power is often called "the best aphrodisiac." Each of these issues profoundly affects the social or institutional as well as the private realms of human life. Money primarily relates to the "business" sector, meaning the task of producing goods and services that may either bless or oppress humankind. But in the world, the predominant human posture towards money is dominated by greed and self-indulgence. Sex relates foremost to "marriage," and thus has the power to either facilitate "the deepest possible intimacy or the greatest possible alienation" amongst humans. Again, the human posture towards sex is driven primarily by the passions of lust and exploitation. The issue of power foremost works through the arena of human government. By government, Foster means "the enterprise of human organization that can lead toward either liberty or tyranny."


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Throughout history, this triad of money, sex, and power has always occupied a central concern in Christian ethics. And as Foster notes, spiritual revivals have usually been accompanied by clear, bold responses to the social fallouts of wrong postures towards money, sex and power.¹⁴

What prompted me to enter this posting was how Foster begins his "Epilogue" with Henri Nouwen’s admonishment: "You are a Christian only so long as you constantly pose critical questions to the society you live in . . . so long as you stay unsatisfied with the status quo and keep saying a new world is yet come." I’ve only given a quick scanning of Foster's book thus far. But I've concluded that Foster's message remains and has become even more relevant for our present day. This is a message that needs to be re-visited and re-read by 21st century Christians, particularly by 21st century first-world, Evangelical middle and upper class Christians.

Foster is exhorting us towards the believer's role in society as salt and light. As Nouwen says, this is a role that enjoins us to "stay unsatisfied with the status quo," evidenced by a social witness that poses critical questions to the immediate society we live in. For as Foster reminds us, Christians should "stand in contradiction to the dominant culture [around us], which has given its soul to the vows of greed, permissiveness, and selfishness."²⁵ Foster therefore suggests that we approach the issues of money, sex, and power, through the spiritual disciplines of simplicity, fidelity, and service. I thus also appreciate and wholly agree with Foster’s conviction that, “Believers can and should be called into positions of power, wealth, and influence. . . . in government, education and business." And as Foster says, “Some are called to make money— lots of money— for the glory of God and the larger public good.”²⁶

I will now focus more specifically on the issue of wealth, particularly on the Christian’s posture towards and use of wealth. One context for this discussion lies in a series of discussions generated by Reverend Kenny Chee’s blogsite, Blogpastor.²⁷ For varied reasons, these discussions delved into relation between wealth and Christian churches, particularly mega-churches.²⁸ Another context is the growing influence of "success" themed paradigms of Christian life.²⁹ A third context, which I believe casts a rather dark, satirical shadow on this entire discussion, is the global economic meltdown. What makes this context so satirical and ludicrous, is how consistently nonreligious sources are reminding us that at the root of this meltdown, is human greed and selfishness. Moreover, what our greed and selfishness is ultimately leading us to is unrestrained human consumption of limited resources. Furthermore, our unrestrained drive towards material consumption is not only destroying the earth, but is increasingly exploiting and robbing millions of the world's "have-nots" of any viable opportunity towards a life of ample resources for attaining a viable livelihood. The first-world order is robbing the earth and the world’s “have-nots,” in order to keep satiated and satisfied, the first-world’s middle and upper middle class “haves.”

2. The light side of wealth
I find it helpful that Foster provides an excellent and clear understanding into the paradoxical nature of wealth, as well as sex and power. As Foster reminds us, let us be clear: Wealth is not entirely wrong! The Bible clearly narrates two paradoxical, divergent, and thus often

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⁴ Blogpastor ( http://www.blogpastor.net ).
⁵ see Blogpastor at: http://www.blogpastor.net/category/church/megachurches.
⁶ See Blogpastor at: http://www.blogpastor.net/category/society-culture.
contradictory theological streams and themes regarding the topic of material wealth. Foster calls these two streams, the “dark side” and the “light side” of material wealth. On one hand, there is a tradition throughout Scripture, which affirms wealth as oftentimes, God's blessing! The Bible in fact begins with an important declaration: Everything material, which God has created, is "good" (Gen 1-2)! Yes! With God's blessing and favour, we can enjoy wealth! When wealth falls into our hands, we can, and it should in fact, prompt us towards doxology and worship (Deut 16:15)! The experience of material wealth can actually serve to enrich and deepen our relationship with God. However, this is an experience, which comes to us because the receiving of wealth has prompted us to thank God and praise Him for what He gives us.

Furthermore, we should affirm that the Lord Jesus welcomed the contributions of wealthy patrons to his life and ministry (Luke 8:1-3). Jesus obviously also very much enjoyed attending lavish luncheons and dinners in the homes of the wealthy. He seemed in fact to find it difficult to turn down a good meal, where ever it came from (Luke 7:36f; 11:37f; 14:1f). So I agree and like what Gordon Wong says: "God is not a killjoy! He desires for us to experience the finest foods and sweetest honey (Ps 81:16). And there is in fact, a “positive ‘consumer’ language found throughout the Psalms (Ps 34:8)."

Interestingly however, the Gospel story narrates that in virtually every “dining” incident, Jesus did not fail to leave such homes without voicing some kind of “prophetic” and provocative word regarding his hosts' posture and behaviour towards the “have-nots” in their local communities.

I happen to believe in fact, that the economic role of Christians in this world clearly involves finding ways to create wealth. Yet not for the purpose of further amassing and sustaining the present standards of first-world lifestyles or first-world levels of material consumption. Global capitalism in its past and present historical form of wholly unrestrained free market interplay— which while capable to a large degree of democratising the experience of wealth, is nonetheless driven not by the "love of the Father, but by the "world's passions." These are the passions which Scripture defines as "the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does" (1 John 2:16).

3. The dark side of wealth

Without in any way inferring the slightest endorsement of Marxist practice or ideology, I must acknowledge that Marxist theory had nonetheless quite accurately diagnosed the tendency within pure free-market capitalism to de-humanise and exploit people, particularly the poor masses— as things. Through the current global market system, what is actually happening on a global scale is that the world’s most affluent populations are using the world’s poor in order to satiate their increasing drive towards greater consumption. Therefore, there must come a time, when believers will again help find a better way. That better way, will ultimately and must involve self-initiated restraints on personal consumption.

Globalisation is itself not the problem. We can actually apprehend globalisation as a primal cure towards a substantive eradication of human poverty across the globe. But human greed, increasingly manifest through a collective conglomerate of multi-national businesses, have up to this present financial crisis, demonstrated a willingness to increase wealth for themselves and their constituencies, at the expense of millions of disempowered people in the two-thirds world. These disempowered people are often fully cognisant of the wealth

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that can be theirs through a linking up with the global economy. Yet they wholly lack the infrastructure, tools and skills to participate in the global market.\textsuperscript{14}

For this reason, a Christian response and approach to globalisation must reflect Keynesian ideology towards global and local financial systems. Given the reality of human greed, free markets cannot therefore operate independently and wholly apart from governmental intervention. For Christians, we ought to recognise that enforced restraint with reference to the creation and use of wealth, falls upon the divinely mandated role of human government within the fallen world order (Romans 13:1-4). Believers themselves are responsible to both embrace and model restraint in both acquisitions and consumption. More about this later.

Correspondingly, Christians must find themselves at the forefront of conceptualising and modeling within the affluent first-world, an eco-friendly existence and lifestyle. In our present day, a current reading of the Bible’s creation narrative, coupled with all Scripture has to say about stewardship, the role of humanity upon the earth, and recognising creation as a trust given to us by God, should enjoins us Christians to identify ourselves as “Green.” For too long, Christians have wrongly postured themselves towards the Genesis 1:28 creation-cultural mandate (e.g., “Subdue the earth and take dominion over it . . . ”) through the wrong paradigms of unrestrained acquisition, accumulation, and environmental exploitation. We should rather appreciate our mandate as shepherds of the good earth, wherein we voluntarily subordinate our desires and freedom to the rhythms of creation (e.g., Ecclesiastes 3:1-11, 15; 6:10).\textsuperscript{15} This is what the Bible calls, wisdom.

The Christian ethic towards wealth in our present day must also involve not only an affirmed “yes” towards redistributing material wealth, but also a redistribution of the power to create wealth. We must work towards redistributing the power to create wealth into the hands of the “have-nots,” thus empowering them also with the capacity to generate wealth. We today have one well-known Muslim who has modeled the way, particularly for us Christians. He is none other than the Nobel Peace Prize winner and one time modest economics professor, Muhammad Yunus. In Bangladesh Yunus founded the now famous Grameen Bank in 1976 and thus the micro-credit movement. The genius of Yunus’ paradigm began with the simple task of loaning $30 out of his own wallet to a group of poverty-stricken women, who were looking for a way to start a small business. Grameen Bank works today in more than 46,000 Bangladeshi villages through 1,267 branches involving more than 12,000 staff members. It has lent more than $4.5 billion in loans of $12 to $15!\textsuperscript{16}

As Steven Covey says, Yunus has profoundly modeled to all of us, what it means to help the “voiceless,” “find their voices!”\textsuperscript{17} Even as a Muslim, Yunus’ life example is in fact wholly descriptive and indicative of true and authentic Christian ministry and service, which Jesus mandated through His inaugural sermon at Nazareth (Luke 4:16-19):

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Jesus is preaching the messianic year of Jubilee! Let it be thus acknowledged that in the age to come, there will indeed a redistribution of wealth, from the rich to the poor, for that is what Jubilee is all about (Leviticus 25:23; Isaiah 61:1-2f; Luke 4:16-19). And moreover, there is indeed a biblical tradition, which well affirms the potential goodness of wealth, and


\textsuperscript{17} Covey, The 8th Habit, 9-10.
its potential power to steer our hearts towards praise and thanksgiving to God for His bountiful and generous works towards us.

However, and this is what completes the paradox of wealth according to the biblical story: there is as Foster reminds us, the “dark side” of wealth. The awful reality is that paradoxically, the Old Testament wholly depicts the “rich man” as the definitive metaphor for the “wicked man.” The “rich man” is thus the definitive person (particularly in the Psalms), who oppresses the poor; and who in his wickedness robs the masses of justice (e.g., Ps 10:5-6; 37:7-11; 49:10-12; 73:2-9). The truth is that throughout the Bible, the Scriptures consistently dramatise the “rich man” as a metaphor for the “wicked man!”

Jesus also drew upon this tradition, when He preached about the “great reversal” (Luke 6:20-26). The Book of James draws upon that same tradition wherein it describes the “rich” as those who oppress the “poor.” Moreover, it says that God is Himself partial towards not the “rich” but the “poor” (James 2:5-7; 5:1-6). We also know that at the heart of Paul’s vision of community, is that his primary injunctions for self-initiative in reconciliation are specifically directed towards one social-economic group, and that is the wealthy. For it was the wealthy in fact, who were the primary obstacles towards the creation of a heterogeneous Christian community (e.g., 1 Cor 11). For sake of brevity, I am not even examining the tradition as exemplified through the prophetic writings, which is however, even more so self-evident.

All through Scripture, it is on the other hand, the “poor” who are presented as the definitive metaphor for the “righteous!” I will not here explore or highlight any biblical proof-texts, as the preceding verses should aptly serve to demonstrate how Psalms consistently conveys the “poor” as the definitive metaphor for the “righteous.” It is pertinent however to draw attention to the Song of Mary (Luke 1:46-52f). For her song directly draws upon the same imagery of the displacement of the “rich” by the “poor,” a theme which Mary drew from Hannah’s song (1 Samuel 2:4-8f).

I want to now return to Foster’s analysis on the “dark side” of wealth. Foster declares that its darkness is most evident today in our insane “lust for affluence,” which he describes as “psychotic.” Foster writes: “It is psychotic” because through affluence we have “completely lost touch with reality . . . [For] The mass media have convinced us that to be out of step with fashion is to be out of step with reality. It is time we awaken to the fact that conformity to a sick society is to be sick.”

Foster then draws attention to how this “psychosis permeates even our [cultural] mythology. The modern hero is the poor boy who purposefully becomes rich rather than the rich boy who voluntarily becomes poor.” Thus, “Covetousness we call ambition. Hoarding we call prudence. Greed we call industry.”

Finally, Foster reminds us regarding Jesus’ personification of “money” as an idol; a “god” existing in opposition to God (Matt 6:24). Mammon is an Aramaic term for deity; it signifies a “god.” When Jesus used the Aramaic term mammon, he demonstrated that money is not a morally neutral medium of exchange. On the contrary: money in this present evil age exists as a “power,” an entity that seeks to enslave us, by steering our devotion from God to itself. This is precisely why elsewhere Jesus also calls money, “unrighteous mammon” (Luke 16:9). Coupled with the term “mammon, the term “unrighteous” (adikos), strongly conveys the idea that mammon actively generates iniquity. So again, if we are honest with the biblical story, money does not exist as a morally neutral medium of exchange. Money is rather an idolatrous entity and power, highly capable of provoking our love towards its existence, thus further qualifying its existence as a “root of all kinds of evil.”

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I need to draw attention to one evil that Christian employers and bosses must give careful attention to during this time of financial turmoil. Now across the board, the records show that over the past few years in Singapore, the salaries of top-level employees and executives have risen considerably. Yet meanwhile, salaries of rank and file workers within the same firms have more or less remained the same. This is wrong. It is the kind of sin, which strongly preoccupies the preaching of the prophets.

“The Lord enters into judgment with the elders and princes of His people; It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your house.” (Isaiah 3:14)
“Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. . . . Listen! The wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.” (James 5:1, 4)

Now we are entering a time where we must cut costs. The temptation of many employers is to find ways to cut costs while at the same time, seeking to preserve existing profit margins that directly feed into their own incomes. So rather than allow those profit margins to diminish, they rather choose to cut the salaries of their rank and file workers. It is encouraging to hear however, that while the Singapore investment company Temasek Holdings, is the first employer in Singapore to have publicly announced company-wide wage cuts at this time; 90% of those wage savings will be borne by its top senior management.²² I think that their example should aptly serve notice to Christian employers and top decision-makers in any given firm.

4. The paradox of wealth
As Christians, we must therefore approach and interpret wealth from the basis of its paradoxical nature; acknowledging both the dark as well as the light side of wealth. Jesus exhorts us to do so, when he tells us to “make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings” (Luke 16:9). We are here encouraged to create and use wealth in “such a way that when it fails— and it will fail— we are still cared for,” all through eternity.²³ The Bible thus depicts wealth, as it does a host of other issues, through the principle of paradox.

By paradox, I mean that sometimes, we often find truth, reality, or “what works best,” in the middle of two opposing polarities, held in balanced tension to one another. There are different ways of saying this: The balancing of two almost contradictory statements or ideas, which seem to oppose each other. Alternatively, sometimes we find truth not by choosing one or the other of two opposing views, but only by finding value in the middle of both. This means acknowledging that the truth is found not fully, or primarily in either polarity, but in the middle on a continuum between those two polarities. It is therefore often the case in Christian life, doctrine, and theology, that when the challenge of holding both opposing polarities together in tension fails, therein often lies the emergence of heresy. Most illustrious is the confessing of our Lord Jesus Christ, as one person— fully human and fully God.

And so it is with wealth. Wealth exists in this present age, as a paradoxical phenomenon. So again, as Foster reminds us, the only right Christian posture towards wealth is one that wholly holds its two contradictory natures in tension: both its “dark side” and its “light side.” For the Scriptures narrate not one unified, but two divergent traditions regarding wealth: On one hand, the experience of material wealth can be ours, and God does give wealth. And so when wealth comes to us, it should lift our hearts in thanksgiving to God and service to the

²² Francis Chan, “Temasek to Start Firm-wide Pay Cuts,” The Straits Times (Saturday, November 22, 2008), page A22.
²³ Foster, The Challenge of the Disciplined Life, 52.
world. Yet on the other hand, the experience of material wealth is clearly detrimental to our spiritual health. Too often than not, material wealth warps our values. Wealth easily and deceptively takes the form as “unrighteous mammon,” and places us in opposition to the poor, and to what God is doing in the world.

Our only recourse is to find our way in the middle and there remain. Only here in the middle are we in the safe place. This is the place where we stand in the presence of God. Only there can we best live out our prophetic role as Christians in a fallen world order. This is the place where we gladly and joyfully stand in contradiction to the dominant culture of our world. In our vocational and prophetic role as witnesses to God’s kingdom, we thus “critique” the consensus that enslaves and oppresses us. Moreover, it here that we conversely speak forth a word that frees, delivers and empowers towards God’s dream and future. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggests, this is the place where on one hand we witness to Christ’s incarnation, and thus His blessing upon this “good earth.” Yet this is also the place where we witness to Christ’s crucifixion, and thus to God’s judgment against the present world order.\(^\text{24}\)

Therefore, our prophetic witness in the society we live in must express a life style that is wholly counter-culture. On one hand, our witness will arise and reflect God’s judgment against the present world order, as perennially revealed through Christ’s crucifixion. This means we must allow the theology of the cross to inform and shape our witness of God’s kingdom. Yet on the other hand, our witness must simultaneously arise from and reflect God’s blessing upon creation and even more so—His present work towards the renewal of creation through the power of Christ’s resurrection. This means then we also must allow a theology of the resurrection—of Christ’s resurrection and His present life in us, to inform and shape our witness to God’s kingdom. So then, both theologies are not separate but one theology and one message: “Behold! I am making all things new! (Rev 21:5)\(^\text{25}\)

5. The snare of wealth

I have thus far discussed at length the paradoxical "light" and "dark" sides of wealth, and have briefly argued that both sides represent two equally viable and true traditions. Yet inevitably, the principle of paradox ultimately breaks down with regards material wealth in the present age. For all its value in granting us some peace of mind and freedom to pursue and enjoy all we posses, the idea of paradox ultimately even still, fails to fully and accurately conceptualise the Bible’s deeper portrayal of material wealth. If we’re truly honest with ourselves and the archetypical plot that frames the biblical story-world—through its broad themes of creation, fall, and re-creation, we will have to acknowledge that the truth lies not in the middle but somewhere off centre to the left. The ultimately true yet off-centre nature of the truth regarding material wealth in this present age, confronts us not with the "light" side but rather more so, with the "dark" side of wealth.

6. Embracing the “riches to rags” story of Jesus Christ

Earlier I introduced the archetypical plot that scripts most of our human mythology, and aspirations towards personal redemption. More accurately stated, it is the plot that scripts our desired journey towards our desire for human actualisation. This plot is that of "rags to riches." It is the plot of the poor boy who through sheer perseverance, determination and drive, yet also sometimes with the help of providential favour (or a little of both), overcomes all odds and adversities to make something of himself, or rise above his humble beginnings. Often then, as we come to the story’s climax, this protagonist becomes rich and successful. This is a common idea of “redemption.” However, this kind of plot, notwithstanding its noble


and inspiring theme of perseverance against all odds, is wholly antithetical to the archetypical plot offered to us through the biblical story-world. For the archetypical plot scripted for our ideal human development through the Bible’s story-world, is a "riches to rags" story.

It goes like this: Against all odds, a rich king gives up all his wealth to become poor, so that through His poverty, the poor might become rich. This is the story of Christ Jesus the Lord: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.” (2 Corinthians 8:9)

Furthermore, the story of His life, is now presented as the script for those who want to be His disciples: “But just as you excel in everything— in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us— see that you also excel in this grace of giving.” (2 Corinthians 8:7)

Actually however, to be more precise, the archetypical story which the Bible gives for the scripting of our Christian life, is a “riches to rags to riches” story. This is the true good news of Jesus Christ. Motivated from His immeasurable grace towards us, He lets go of His riches; He thus steps down, embraces and partakes of our own poverty, and then as a result— for this is the true nature of grace, He is declared Lord of all creation (Philippians 2:6-11). The key term is in verse 8: “He humbled Himself.” The term is kenosis, meaning, “self-emptying.” Jesus emptied Himself of His heavenly riches. This is the “self-emptying” of Christ. It is Christ Himself, who not only taught, but also first embraced, underwent and modeled to us the proverb’s truth, “He who loses his self, will find his self.”

This basic story line permeates all the New Testament writings. And at the same time it is this story line that is consistently offered to us via the life story of Jesus. Primarily through the Gospel story, the New Testament paradigmatically scripts Jesus’ life as God’s intended pattern for the believer’s life. This is why the Philippians 2:6-11 kenosis text begins with the words, “Let this mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus” (2:5). And this is also why the kenosis text then ends with the encouragement: “Therefore . . . work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (2:12-13).

The story of grace calls us and leads us not into a “rags to riches” story, but rather into a “riches to rags” story. Yet even more, this story is more precisely still, a “riches to rags to riches” story! For the follower of Jesus, our own kenosis experience inevitably will at some point touch upon our material wealth— the things we possess, whether these be material possessions or societal roles and positions of influence and authority. The reason is that within the present age, all these things so easily exist to us as mammon; as idols demanding our total devotion. They are thus hindrances to our capacity to let go and enter into the true life, which Jesus has scripted for us. That is why Jesus says, “You cannot serve both God and mammon.”

7. Finding through losing
Let it us clearly affirm that the gospel of grace is indeed a gospel that proclaims grace. What makes it a gospel of grace is that through it, Jesus’ disciples have found the freedom to proclaim grace to the entire world. For through discovering this freedom to give, they are now able to extend grace to those who are poor and therefore lack grace. These disciples make this proclamation by “losing” their life; by letting go of their life. They let go of their life by embracing and stepping into the footprints of Jesus.
Through stepping into the footprints of Jesus, they thus freely step into His “riches to rags” story by losing their own material wealth, so that the poor might become rich. This is what the gospel of grace really means. Shaped by the story of Jesus, the gospel of grace gives us the freedom to step into Jesus' own life script. We thus allow His script to shape our own life story. We thus find ourselves liberated to experience in our own life, Jesus' description of the grace-driven life:

“Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

It is not correct to say then that in Christianity, spiritual transformation is a wholly passive experience. Christian spiritual transformation is not something we receive and enjoy by directing our thoughts upon Christ, and thus “resting in His finished work on the cross. This premise does convey a truth, and an important and most needful truth that we need to grasp if we are to grow in the Lord. Yet it is not the whole truth, as it is very different from the full adventure that is loaded and unpacked when a person encounters the grace of God.

A true grace-touched life is loaded with experiences of risk and faith, in contrast to this putrid conception of Christian rest. G.K. Chesterton likens the difference to that we find between statues of Buddha and Buddhist saints, and those of the medieval statues Christian saints. “The Buddhist saint has a sleek and harmonious body, but his eyes are heavy and sealed with sleep. The medieval saint’s body is wasted to its crazy bones, but his eyes are frightfully alive. . .  The Buddhist is looking with a peculiar intentness inwards. The Christian is staring with a frantic intenntness outwards.”

Chesterton goes to say that this contrast ultimately emerges from the thrilling and adventurous “story” which Christ calls us to enter into. For the “Christian existence is a story,” like that of “a thrilling novel . . . [where] the hero is not eaten by cannibals; but it is essential to the existence of the thrill that he might be eaten by cannibals.” The ever witty Chesterton goes on to conclude then that there is therefore, real “fear” that the believer may sometimes encounter in a true walk of Christian faith. This is because the experience of fear is part of the Christian adventure: “Orthodoxy makes us jump by the sudden brink of hell; it is only afterwards that we realise that jumping was an athletic exercise highly beneficial to our health. [For] It is only afterwards that we realise that this danger is the root of all drama and romance.” Therefore, “The strongest argument for the divine grace is simply its ungraciousness.”

This is the true story that Jesus calls us to enter into. When Jesus calls us into His grace, and we respond, we enter into the paradox of true Christian life. Again, Jesus describes the paradox through the proverb: “The one who keeps his life shall lose it, but the one who loses his life shall find it.” Chesterton rightly described this as “a conflict; the collision of two passions apparently opposite . . . a contradiction in terms.” Christianity is therefore “a superhuman paradox whereby two opposite passions may blaze beside each other.” Jesus’ proverb illustrates the paradoxical nature of courage, and is therefore indeed a call to courage. It is a certain kind of courage, which the disciple must embrace in order to follow Christ. Thus, what Jesus says “is not a piece of mysticism for saints and heroes. It is a piece of everyday advice for sailors or mountaineers. . . . This paradox is the whole principle of courage.” For mountaineers climbing the face of a mountain, can only escape death by “continually stepping within an inch of it [e.g., death]. A solider surrounded by enemies, if he

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27 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 142.
28 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 166.
29 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 94.
30 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 155.
is to cut his way out, needs to combine a strong desire for living with a strange carelessness about dying. . . . he must desire life like water and yet drink death like wine.31

8. Weaknesses of the success-themed gospel

The freedom we find in Christ is a true freedom that frees us to let go. Now there is at present, a school of thought within Evangelical Christianity, which is exclusively qualifying itself as the "message of grace," or as the "gospel of grace." Within this school of thought, Christians are encouraged to surmise that Christian freedom "in Christ," is a "freedom" to achieve, acquire, and gain without guilt. But this mindset completely misses the point of what God’s grace is all about! The logic of this teaching exists on a plane that is not even at dialogue with the biblical narrative. Its storytellers are not quite even stepping into the story! What they are preaching is but a vague echo of the true rendition.

There is even more, a far deeper weakness with the “success" themed "gospel" that is being propagated today as the "gospel of grace," and as a reformed return to authentic Christian spirituality. The basic message of this self-defined "gospel of grace" is more or less something like this: “In Christ, your sins are forgiven, rest in the finished work of Christ in the cross, and so— be free! Be free to pursue your dreams and enjoy the bounty of this good earth!” Yet for all this talk of calling believers to a life of grace “in Christ,” resting in the finished work of Christ’s atonement, reigning with Christ and receiving His riches, the proponents of this movement have ironically failed to grasp the greater fullness of Christ’s atonement!

The weakness of the “success" themed gospel, particularly with reference to the so-called “grace" movement, lies so ironically in its impoverished doctrine of Christ’s atonement. The weakness lies in how proponents of these movements teach Christ's atonement as primarily directed towards the forgiveness of sins, thus granting us who believe in Christ, a “positional” righteousness. In itself, this is of course “a” (note the indefinite article here!) correct doctrine of the atonement. Christian theologians have historically defined this understanding, as the forensic view of the atonement, for its chief metaphor is the courtroom setting. We find this view foremost illustrated in Paul’s letter to the Romans. However, while Christ’s suffering for the forgiveness of our sins is a correct purpose of His atonement, it is only so within the indefinite article “a,” not the definite article "the." The granting of a positional righteousness is "one" of the benefits of Christ's atonement, not "the" primary benefit of Christ's atonement.

There are therefore a few other purposes and/or benefits to Christ's atonement, which the Scriptures clearly teach us. Unfortunately, the “paradigms” given to us in our churches and schools have for too longed blinded us in modern Protestant Evangelicalism, from observing their presence in the Scriptures. Therefore, within modern Protestant Evangelicalism, these other purposes of Christ's atonement have been unfortunately sidelined and undermined. Besides the forensic purpose of Christ's atonement, there are essentially three other equally viable and important purposes of the atonement, which are narrated throughout the New Testament. First, is that Christ died to set us free from the works of the devil (1 John 3:8; Heb 2:14-15). Second, is that He died to "restore" us to God's likeness, by granting us the "right script" to live our life (Heb 2:10-13).

Since early Christian history, the teaching that Jesus died to "restore" us to God’s likeness through granting us the “right script” to live our life, has been perhaps the most enduring and comprehensive understanding of Christ’s atonement. Since around the second century, Christians have commonly called this the recapulatory purpose of Christ's atonement. It means that Jesus "re-capped" the human life journey, as the perfect human being. In doing so, Jesus purposely paved the way for us to live as He lived, through each phase of His own

31 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, 94.
human life. Christ’s life, as narrated in the Gospels, actually serves as the paradigm for our own human life, thus God’s intended “script” for living our own life, which results in us becoming conformed to the likeness of Jesus Christ. This leads to the third purpose of the atonement, which is that Christ died to grant us a moral and life example for us to follow (John 3:16; 1 Peter 2:21).

The truth is that down through history, varied church traditions and spiritual streams have tended to lean towards one of these different atonement purposes, yet to the exclusion or minimising of the other just as important doctrines of the atonement. Protestant Evangelicals tend to envision Christ’s atonement, almost exclusively in terms of the doctrine of justification, and thus upon the message of forgiveness through His substitutionary death on the cross. But it should be readily apparent that in contrast to the Protestant Evangelical nuance upon the “forgiveness of sins” through Christ’s atonement—the other and equally viable purposes of the atonement all together lean more towards the doctrine and experience of sanctification. This refers not to the experience of having our sins forgiven, but to the process of God delivering us from the power of sin and becoming restored into the likeness of God, revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.

Obviously, a truly robust preaching and teaching of Christ’s atonement, and thus the proclamation of the “full Gospel” of Christ, would ideally involve keeping each of these atonement ideas unified into a single and thus full Gospel message. And the truth is that when we hold together not just the forensic view of Christ’s atonement, but all the other more sanctification-nuanced understandings of the atonement, what we find ourselves affirming and proclaiming is not just Christ’s death, but His present life in us—His resurrection. We thus proclaim that we are now being “saved” (e.g., sanctified) through His resurrection life. 

Modern Protestant Evangelicalism has tended however, to lean exclusively towards the forensic idea or purpose of the atonement. The upside of this has been the movement’s focus towards leading people into an experience of having their sins forgiven, and having a cognitive certainty that they are in a right standing with God—justified through faith in Christ. Yet too often, the downside has drifted into two divergent directions, which often work together. On one hand has been the creation of a highly guilt-driven, legalistic “do’s and don’t” conception of Christian spirituality. This has also led to the practice of measuring spiritual maturity by the confession of “right doctrine.”

On the other hand, the Modern Protestant Evangelical preoccupation with the forensic purpose of the atonement has tended to create a spirituality that strongly proclaims the finished work of Christ, while virtually excluding any attention to the sanctifying purpose of Christ’s atonement. This would include themes such as the dialogical interplay between God’s loving will and the believer’s development through a freely entered response to that will. It also includes understanding one’s life journey as a perpetual turning towards God. It includes the experience of sensing the freedom to enter into Christ’s own life journey as a disciple of Christ, and of discovering the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit, who is at work in us to do so. Finally this naturally results in developing a conscious discontent toward the predominate culture of one’s historical setting. This conversely includes gaining a desire to seek more and more of the Spirit’s anointing upon one’s life as a witness to God’s kingdom.

The success themed “gospel,” with its sole nuance upon the forensic-directed finished work of Christ has primarily emerged as a self-presumed corrective to what its proponents perceive as the guilt-driven, legalistic “do’s and don’t” form of Protestant Evangelical spirituality. This is why its teachers, leaders, and proponents define their movement as the “Gospel of Grace.” As earlier mentioned however, the conception of the “grace life in Christ,” as is often now being taught in many success-themed churches and movements,

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actually emerges from quite a weak and impoverished understanding of grace, as well as from a very impoverished understanding of Christ’s atonement.

Ultimately, the success-themed “grace” movement only mirrors to a more vivid degree, the underlying weakness of Protestant Evangelicalism in its own failure to preach the full gospel of Christ. For the peculiarities of the success-themed “gospel,” as with so much of Protestant modern Evangelicalism, directly mirrors its captivity to the story-world of arrogant modernity. This is a story-world in which “money, power, and sex have become the norm, displacing relationship, stewardship and worship.” This is a story-world where the quest and journey towards human actualisation has taken centre-stage in virtually every social arena, including the sphere of spirituality. This includes Christian spirituality, and thus the spirituality we express and practice within the Protestant Evangelical Church.

Furthermore, vast numbers of Evangelical church leaders, particularly evidenced by success-themed churches and movements, have wholly brought into the consumer-driven interest of parishioners, who simply do not know any better. The result is that authentic Christian spirituality is now “swallowed up by commercial interests,” according to the “marketing and management categories” of their lay leaders and board members. Consequently, as so perceptibly observed by the Malaysian pastor Sivin Kit, we have now become “uncritically . . . syncretised with consumerism” and in our craving for “relevance.” So what we now have, particularly evidenced through the “success-themed” church, is a conception of Christian life and ministry “perceived primarily through the lens of consumerism, a system, mentality and tendency with consumption at its centre.” This consumption driven conception of Christian spirituality arises from a mentality in which “relevance” has now become the all-encompassing “rallying cry” of believers. It has become the rallying cry of church members, leaders and even senior pastors, as we increasingly perceive target groups and church members as “customers” and church staff or leaders as “producers.”

But because the “success-themed” church has so deeply brought into the modern story of human self-actualisation, it thus envisions the biblical experience of redemption according to a story-line that is radically counter to the Bible’s archetypical plot of Jesus’ self-emptying journey. As earlier seen, this is the story-line which the Bible offers us as the paradigmatic model for the Christian life journey towards sanctification, and thus complete redemption. But what the “success-themed” church movement has brought into is an idea of redemption that highly mirrors the world’s idea of redemption. The world’s idea of redemption is again, usually narrated through its archetypical plot of the “against all odds,” “rags to riches” success story.

Now the truth is that people, because they are created in God’s image, have an inherent need for a redemptive ending in the stories they hear. The idea or experience of redemption is thus the ultimate need, the deepest cry, of the human heart. That is why, “our every-day talk is filled with redemptive metaphors. People often speak of, “every dark cloud has a silver lining,” “it’s always darkest before dawn,” and “no pain, no gain,” [phrases which] suggest that suffering in life can often lead to growth or fulfilment.” We therefore like to watch movies, read stories, or listen to motivational speakers that in one way or another speak to our innate desire to experience redemption.

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35 Kit, “I Shop Therefore I am,” Church & Society in Asia Today, 44.
36 Kit, “I Shop Therefore I am,” Church & Society in Asia Today, 41, 45.
So recognising the human need for some kind of developmental experience of redemption, and yet wanting to avoid appropriating the Gospel teaching of “self-denial” into our “Christian education,” what we end up with is construing Christian development according to varied paradigms of pop psychology. We thus foremost turn not to the Gospel’s account of Jesus’ life for patterning our spiritual journey, but rather to, models of “developmental psychology” (e.g., Abraham Maslow, Erick Erikson, or Lawrence Kohlberg). I am not against some measure of integrating development theory into our understanding of human development. But the result of trying to conceptualise Christian development primarily according to human developmental theory, without the sometimes painful message of “self-denial,” leads to a nonChristian conception of spiritual growth. The result is that we envision spiritual maturity as having a healthy self image,” and a “freed-up” life-style. Then, given that we have identified these non-biblical self-actualisation endeavours as the objectives of Christian development, we gauge Christian spirituality according to evidences of a substantial income and a guilt-free comfort with being “in-sync” with the latest cultural trends, fashions, and common benchmarks of material success.

The truth therefore is that so much of the premised teachings about “God’s grace,” in the newer success-themed churches, largely reflect premises derived from pop psychology about human self-esteem and self-actualisation. These are premises, which were earlier already propagated by the older “positive thinking” school of Norman Vincent Peale and the “possibility thinking” of Robert Schuller.” Present-day “Christian prosperity” proponents, such as John Osteen, are now propagating these same premises through the material-success driven “gospel, coupled with the basic consumer-driven ethos that clothes so much of modern Evangelicalism.” Consequently, Evangelicalism now possess little if any kind of “counter-culture” critique, since it has become so “thoroughly enmeshed in consumer-capitalist ideology and confuses success with the eschaton” (e.g., Christian life journey).

Meanwhile, an amazing irony has emerged regarding the common “experience” of grace within the more success-themed “grace-centred” churches. The irony is that their members and proponents are so often by and large, smugly identifying themselves as a people who “have arrived,” to the exclusion of any one who begs to differ with them. Those who embrace the success-themed gospel message, more often than not, see no need to engage or reflect on the spiritualities existing within other Christian traditions, either in the present day or down through history. In essence, they are thus choosing to exist as communities of faith that have no viable need to learn from other Christian faith traditions.

Furthermore, Bible texts often serve no higher purpose than to anchor messages based more deeply upon pop psychology or modern leadership and motivational theories and platitudes. Their resolve to dismiss any value or need to learn from other traditions would of course include any openness to acquaint themselves with some basic trans-accepted principles in Bible reading. This is especially so since they choose rather to base their entire conception of Christian faith exclusively upon the teachings of their movement’s leaders or local senior pastor. And by the way, I am not referring to the Protestant historical-grammatical exegesis. I am rather simply referring to the older historical practice of devotionally reading the whole scripture as co-participants who within the grand biblical story of God’s grace coming down towards humanity and creation, according to the grand biblical plot of creation, fall and recreation through Christ.

There is as well, a mindset amongst so many believers, particularly amongst those highly influenced by the more success-themed teachings, that the things they possess are signs of

39 Kit, “I Shop Therefore I am,” Church & Society in Asia Today, 44.
God’s favour towards them. Coupled with this is their conviction that their consumerist lifestyle is in some way, their “Christian right.” These believe that “in Christ,” they are free to purchase the most non-essential or trivial items—at whatever the cost, without any whim of conscience. But let it be unreservedly said that their consumer-driven lifestyle is a blight to the counter-cultural witness of the Church. Their present consumer-driven lifestyle is particularly damaging to the counter-cultural witness of the Church during this present time of economic crisis.

9. Contrasts between cheap and costly grace
Bonhoeffer rightly diagnosed the impoverished preaching of grace in the success-themed “grace” movement, after witnessing the emergence of a similar “Christian” ethos in Nazi Germany. This resulted in the unfortunate wedding between many of the German churches to the predominate values of German nationalism. It was then that Bonhoeffer foresaw and warned the global church about the perils of “cheap grace;” the “preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance . . . grace without discipleship.”41 As rightly declared by Bonhoeffer however, the true preaching of grace can never place a “full stop” after the term—justification! A believer only fully apprehends God’s grace as he or she makes conscious and successive decisions to step into the footprints of Christ and enter into His life journey. And the believer who wholly steps into the footprints of Christ with the resolve to enter into His life journey, does so because he or she then realises that Jesus’ aim towards us is nothing less the total “re-creation” of our entire life.42

So as earlier mentioned, the true biblical story and archetypical plot of redemption is radically and diametrically opposite to the “rags to riches” success-driven vision of redemption. These two divergent arch-story-plots are diametrically opposite because the world’s “rags to riches” idea of human redemption fails to appreciate the awful reality of sin. Embracing God’s script for our lives is obviously entirely diametrically opposed to the world’s script, because it is none other than the god called mammon, is choreographing the world’s “rags to riches” script of redemption.

So then, our need is for a radical “deprogramming” of a sin-infected mind-set. Jesus has made this deprogramming script available for us through His complete life-story. Therefore, it is none other than Jesus who has choreographed for us, the “riches to rags to riches” script that is thus now the biblical paradigm for our own life-journey towards redemption. This script which Jesus has enacted for us, encompasses his entire life, suffering on the cross, and resurrection. This is precisely what Jesus reveals to us through His invitation: “Deny yourself, pick up your cross, and follow me!” This is why Bonhoeffer rightly observed that, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”43 But it is the willing experience to step into the totality of Christ’s life, to receive His life journey as the “script” for our life, and allow Him to thus “script” our life according to His pattern, that we experience the result of biblical redemption, which is sanctification—our restoration into His likeness.

The success-themed “grace” gospel strives to centre our concern upon our life “in Christ”—our positional righteousness in Christ. Nonetheless, this again is not the whole story! Rather it is our life “in Christ,” and Christ “in us!” The good news of this complete equation is Christ becoming “formed in us” (Gal 4:19). For as C. S. Lewis rightly observed, Jesus “intends to come and live in [our life] Himself.” However, “the process will be long and in parts painful.” So, “we must not be surprised if we are in for a rough time!”44 God is thus not out to improve our personality. He is not out to create in us, “a better you.” He is rather out to grant us the personality of Jesus Christ.

It is the very personality of Jesus, which the New Testament calls, the “new self. This again is why biblical redemption is not foremost “rags to riches,” but “riches to rags.” For God’s process of redemption, means that we have “lose our “self,” so we can find our true self. In other words, in the paradoxical word of Jesus, we can only find our life, when we first lose our life. God is bestowing His grace upon us, that through the receiving of His grace, we become living sacraments of His grace. Through the receiving of His grace, we learn to give grace.”

Because as Jesus says, we know one has been forgiven much, when we see such a one— forgiving others (Luke 7:47).

In his classic expose of “cheap grace” titled, The Cost of Discipleship, Bonhoeffer has perceptively demonstrated that an authentic encounter with God's grace is not a wholly passive, unilateral experience. When God bestows His grace upon us, it always also calls us into a dialogical encounter with Himself. God’s grace comes through the call of Jesus, when He says, "come and follow me." The call of Jesus therefore also accompanies that very moment in time when a person is justified from his or her sins. It is not a call that is subsequent to justification, although a person may not become cognizant of the "call," or fully comprehend the life-changing implications of that "call" until many years after God justifies the person.

This is why Bonhoeffer also warns that the preaching of “grace without discipleship,” the preaching of grace without a call to "deny your self," is the preaching of "cheap grace." The full biblical picture of the term "grace" is quite loaded and multilayered. At one level, it signifies God’s freely given favour upon us, which includes His freely given call upon us. Right at the same plane yet on a deeper level however, God's grace is "costly because it calls us to follow" Jesus. So Jesus describes the encounter with God’s grace through the parables of the treasure hidden in the field, and the pearl of great price (Matt 13:44-45).

When a person discovers “grace,” which is nothing less than the entire kingdom of God, he sells off all he has that he may enjoy it and it alone. Therefore, he is like the person who finds treasure hidden in a field. But to get the treasure, he must first acquire ownership of the field. So what he does is to sell off all he owns, just to buy that one field. Then he begins the task of digging out the treasure! Alternatively, the person touched by God’s grace is like a merchant who discovers “one pearl of great value.” But again— it is beyond his present cash flow. So therefore, he raises funds by also selling off all he owns— just to buy that “one pearl of great value!”

Therefore, when a person is "graced" by God, and thus apprehends His call, such a person embarks upon a great quest. He gladly sells all he has, in order to finance this quest to find and dig out the hidden treasure. Therefore, God’s grace "is costly because it costs a man his life." Yet "it is grace because it gives a man the only true life." It is the only true life, which can only be lived by not mere "believing," but by following Jesus. True believing, as preached by Bonhoeffer, always therefore means deciding to follow Jesus, to take our feet off the ground and put them into the footprints of Jesus. That is why Bonhoeffer rightly preached that “only he who believes obeys, and only he who obeys, believers.” Again, the experience of grace calls us to step not into a “rags to riches” story, but into the “riches to rags” story of Jesus Christ. Again, an even more accurately description of this graced-called life, is that we are to now step into the “riches to rags to riches” story of Jesus Christ.

10. The river of God’s grace

45 Lewis, “The New Man,” in Mere Christianity, 175.
46 Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, 47, 55, 62, 82.
47 Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, 47.
48 Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, 47.
49 Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, 47.
50 Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, 74.
So how might we better understand, encounter, and identity God’s grace? I have already alluded to a number of helpful models, analogies and metaphors. What I now mention, in seeking to bring this discussion to a closure, will only build upon and further clarify what I have already mentioned. Another biblical metaphor of God’s grace is that of the flowing river. We find the image in John 1:15: “From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.” The verb is not quite past tense; it is rather what we call an active indicative verb, conveying a continuous motion. God’s grace is still flowing! Yet even more illuminating is the term “upon.” We can translate “upon” as, “instead” or “after.” The image is that of one measure of “grace,” constantly being displaced by another measure of grace. It is just as when we watch the river’s flow of running water. New water displaces the water that was there a moment earlier. “Grace takes the place of grace . . . ever new . . . ever fresh.”

Grace then, is like water. And the water constantly flows downward, never upward.

To further help us appreciate the contours of God’s grace, I will draw attention to a recent living example of the “grace-lived” life: Brennan Manning. Manning is the author of the emerging classic, The Ragamuffin Gospel. Critics have come to hail Manning’s book, The Ragamuffin Gospel, as a classic meditation, one of the best ever, on the grace of God. The subject of the whole text is grace, God’s grace. Yet it’s not just an exposition of God’s grace. It is rather a meditation on what a “grace-lived” life looks like and implies, in our 21st century first-world material and consumer and success-driven ethos.

Here is how Manning defines grace: “Grace is the active expression of his love.” Manning’s title to his meditation, The Ragamuffin Gospel, directly infers his definition of grace as the “active expression” of God’s love. The word “ragamuffin” is rare. However, its meaning refers to a ragged, poorly clothed person; or a disreputable person. Manning came up with this peculiar title for his book from listening to a young lady describe her first ever reading on the life of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. The young woman said, “Wow! Like Jesus has this totally intense thing for ragamuffins.” For there in the Gospel, as Manning was himself reminded, “Jesus spent a disproportionate amount of time with people . . . [like] the poor . . . the hungry, sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors . . . the downtrodden, the little ones, the least, the last . . . . In short, Jesus hung out with ragamuffins.” If we want to receive God’s grace, we must take our place, not at the high seat, but at the lowest seat at the table. For only there, can we then hear the word, “Friend, come up higher” (Luke 14:10).

We can argue that Manning’s “storied” thesis is actually to some extent a more updated version of Bonhoeffer’s classic, The Cost of Discipleship. Contrary to popular Protestant thinking, God’s grace is far more that a purely transactional status God bestows upon us at the “new birth.” That is “cheap grace.” Conversion to Christ involves repentance; a willful turning towards a whole new paradigm on life. And with and through that turning, comes a whole new kind of lifestyle, that will create a definitive counter-cultural witness to our consensus around us, tangibly evidenced by how we create and expend our wealth. Manning’s Ragamuffin Gospel reflects the gist of Manning’s life teachings. What Manning has taught through his whole life’s existence, is a profound theological exposition into the meaning and very expression of God’s grace.

According to Manning, the grace of God is not just a noun describing our passive receiving of God’s favour through keeping our eyes on Jesus. No, not at all! Although on one level, we will keep our eyes on Jesus, as we allow Him to work in our lives. Like St Francis of Assisi, Manning taught through his own life, that growing in God’s grace comes through

51 Amy Carmichael, If (London, UK: Dohnavur Fellowship; Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1938), 73-74.
54 Manning, The Ragamuffin Gospel, 51.
embracing, what Foster elsewhere calls, the *spiritual discipline of simplicity*.\(^{55}\) So in willful and deliberate contrast to the American Christian Evangelical but consumerist-driven lifestyle, Manning went about some thirty years ago and developed a modern day (and Protestant version) Franciscan community. Manning’s traveling community drew membership from a number of financially secure followers. Most notable of whom was the late and Grammy awarding winning Christian songwriter, Rich Mullins (who died in a car accident in 1997).

According to Manning, the first introductory example of God’s grace in the Bible begins not in the Gospels, but in Genesis, in the story of Abraham’s journey up Mount Moriah. It was there as we recall that God called Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on the altar. It is in fact this story, which Manning uses to begin his meditation upon the meaning of God’s grace. A meaning, which as earlier mentioned, means nothing less that “the active expression of his love.” Manning writes,

"The child of God knows that the graced life calls him or her to live on a cold and windy mountain, not on the flattened plain of reasonable, middle-of-the-road religion. For at the heart of the gospel of grace, the sky darkens, the wind howls, [and] a young man walks up another Moriah . . . Unlike Abraham, he carries a cross on his back, rather than sticks . . . Like Abraham [eg, He climbs], listening to a wild and restless God who will have His way with us, no matter what the cost. This is the God of the gospel of grace.\(^{56}\)

Manning then goes on to say that the experience of God's grace should, if we’re truly open to the full meaning and implications of grace, cause in us a radical disjunction between our entire existence and the setting we live in. It will thus cause a genuine distaste for the status quo of our modern world. The reason for this all boils down to the very experience of realising that God has accepted us, just as we are. This experience of having been accepted just as we are by God, thus leads to our own and genuine self-acceptance. For we then realise that, "genuine self-acceptance is not derived from the power of positive thinking, mind-games, or pop psychology. It is an act of faith in the God of grace.\(^{57}\) Therefore, as Manning concludes,

"The acceptance of self does not mean to be resigned to the status quo. On the contrary, the more fully we accept ourselves, the more successfully we begin to grow. [For] Love is far better stimulus than threat or pressure.\(^{58}\)

So the life-style implication is this: We no longer find ourselves bound to the social mirror. For, "When we accept ourselves for what we are, we decrease our hunger for power . . . We are no longer preoccupied with being powerful or popular. . . .\(^{59}\) What then happens, as the rest of Manning's book demonstrates, is that we begin freely entering into the "downward flow" of God's grace.

At the heart of Manning's doctrine, and what he has in fact constantly stressed, is what the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard calls "the task of 'becoming' a Christian, as opposed to 'being' a Christian.\(^{60}\) This parallel between Manning’s teaching about God’s grace and Kierkegaard’s teaching on “becoming” a Christian is made by the Christian philosopher Carl Raschke. Raschke finds in Manning a prime example of many emerging postmodern Christian ministry paradigms, which are fortunately shifting away from the late 20th century customer-driven, affluent-friendly ministry model to a radical counterculture form of ministry.


\(^{57}\) Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, 49.


A major tenet to the emerging counterculture ministry model is that Christian discipleship should naturally result in a disciple’s eventual deconstruction of the presumed moral “correctness” of the world’s archetypical quest for material and positional-evidenced success and affluence.61

So back to the link between Manning and Kierkegaard. By beginning his meditation on God’s grace with the story of Abraham’s climb to Mount Moriah, Manning was evidently choosing to align his meditation with Kierkegaard’s earlier and more seminal teaching on Christian faith through the story of Abraham’s “leap of faith” at Mount Moriah. As Raschke observes regarding Kierkegaard’s influence on Manning’s reflections on God’s grace: “Becoming a Christian, as Kierkegaard explained with irony, is not climbing a ladder of spiritual, let alone material, ‘success.’ It all comes down to . . . taking what Kierkegaard himself referred to as the ‘leap of faith,’ a leap into the fearful and unknown.”62

So as a primal paradigm for Christian faith, Abraham’s “leap of faith,” the letting go of Isaac at Mount Moriah, is thus paradigmatic for real decisions every believer must mentally embrace and journey through. These are the tough, risky decisions God’s grace will impose upon our will, as we travel through our personal journey towards “becoming a Christian.” What does it mean now, to “become” a Christian? “Becoming” a Christian, is to become conformed in the likeness of God, revealed in the face of Jesus Christ (Rom 8:28-29; 2 Cor 4:6).

Encountering God’s grace comes through making the “leap of faith,” a leap from trust in one’s self to trust in God alone for our present and future existence. As Manning says, our human will plays a part. Our own will plays a part along with God’s sovereign call, because upon hearing God’s call to Himself, we embrace a “decisive conversion—a turning from mistrust to trust.”63 Even more so, Manning adds that the experience of grace immediately confronts us with the wrongness of our entire present existence in this world’s order. For the truth is that our entire striving towards success, has been premised upon our aching need for have or “self” validated. We have this aching need to have our “self” validated through the acquisition of all our things—our material wealth, our positions, our achievements, our titles, and all our success.

God’s grace thus tells us that “God is on our side and thus we are victors regardless of how well we have played the game.”64 Therefore, what now happens to the grace-touched believer, is not—as the success-themed gospel message so often tells us—that we are now free to pursue without guilt all our innate dreams and present pursuits to continue “climbing” this world’s ladder to success. Rather, what now happened to the grace-touched believer is that knowing God accepts us just as we are in all our failure, we are now free to no longer pursue the “success” dreams the world has laid upon use.65

We are now free to let it all go—to take the existential "leap of faith," and fall into thin air. We now are willing to fall freely along with the downward current of God’s grace. For the river of God’s grace flows naturally not upward but downward. That is why God gives grace to the humble and not the proud. The grace-touched disciple thus worries less about what to wear or what to drink, because he or she has come down to the level of the birds in the air, and the lilies in the field (Matt 6:25-34). Because such a disciple no longer worships mammon (Matt 6:24), he receives all things in life, no matter how big or small as God’s gifts, and thus as expressions of God’s grace. Thus, the disciple is free to serve the kingdom of God, and so go downwards with the flow of grace (Matt 6:33).

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62 Raschke, The Next Reformation, 163.
63 Manning, The Ragamuffin Gospel, 75.
64 Manning, The Ragamuffin Gospel, 77.
65 Manning, The Ragamuffin Gospel, 49.
When the Gospel is preached in all its fullness, it possesses the power and revolutionary purpose towards the entire social, economic and racial settings of our lives. The Gospel in its fullness will challenge the entire social order we live within, and it will confront us in all we have taken for granted in our previous stations within the existing social order. For when in our wealth, God calls us to Himself, our entire life within the material plane of existence, becomes suspect, questioned, and critiqued by the values of kingdom. Yet because the disciple is welcoming his deliverance from the dark side of wealth and acknowledging it as the god called *mammon*, the disciple thus now embraces Jesus’ life and so steps into the footprints of Jesus.

The freed-up disciple that has been touched by grace, is thus willing to embrace the script laid out for him by the Lord Jesus—the redemption that comes through entering into Jesus’ *kenosis*, and thus His “riches to rags” story. Yet thank God that this “riches to rags to riches” story paradoxically leads us back to true riches, which involves the process of being conformed to the likeness of Jesus Christ. Consequently, there will always come a point in time when the graced-touched disciple, will be confronted with a genuine “call” to in some manner or way, express a solidarity with the poor of this world. This is inevitable because just like water, grace goes downward. And its power will pull us towards its rushing, downward destination towards the sea, where it brings fresh life to all things.

Entering into Jesus’ *kenosis*, the process of allowing Christ to script our lives according to his pattern is the only true and authentic response to God’s grace. Two things naturally happen when God touches us through His grace, which is the river of His grace. First is that this same grace flows through us. Second is that we flow with His grace, which is flowing downward. Grace will always lead us into service, servant-hood, and servant-leadership. God’s grace is the water that flows from the high places to the lowest places.

If just once we have received God’s grace, we are like the growing disciple named *Much Afraid*, in Hannah Hurnard’s spiritual allegory, *Hind’s Feet in High Places*. While climbing the high places towards the Shepherd’s Land, she heard the rushing water’s song as it flowed down the mountain: “Come, Let us go away—Lower, lower every day ... from the heights we leap and flow, to the valleys down below. From the height we leap and go, to the valleys down below. Always answering to the call, to the lowest place of all.” And once Much Afraid surrenders to that call, she receives her new name, *Grace and Glory*. God’s grace comes to those who in sheer abandonment surrender to the downward flow of grace. The grace-touched disciple prays, “Abba, I abandon myself into your hands. Do with me what you will. Whatever you may do, I thank you. Into your hands, I commend my spirit. I give myself; I surrender myself into your hands without reserve, with boundless confidence, for you are my Father.”

I will now bring this essay to a closure. I will do so by briefly mentioning a few areas where proponents of the success-themed Gospel, as well as the rest of us living within a consumerist culture, can begin to demonstrate some kind of “counter-culture” witness, through this season of financial turmoil. As just discussed, I will do so from the premise that these are also a few areas reflecting our decision to fall freely downwards along the river of God’s grace, even as through the power of His Spirit, He has poured out His grace upon us. These are just some very brief thoughts, which have come to mind over the past few days.

If the success-themed “grace-centered” church wants to find its call and centre within the greater Body of Christ, then it will have to embark on four broad movements. First, it must acknowledge both the “dark” and “light” sides of material wealth. Second, it will have shift its mindset away from the world’s “rags to riches” idea of redemption, and back towards the biblical paradigm plot of “riches to rags,” foremost modeled for us in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. In so doing, there are obviously endless implications that this basic paradigm

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shift would create within the entire life and ministerial ethos of any given church or movement. Third, and which would create other major paradigm shifts within any Christian community or movement, it would be to embrace the “full Gospel” of God’s grace. This is only possible by embracing all the major purposes of Christ’s atonement. Such would indeed result in a truly orthodox and robust Christian message of grace, as it holds in tension the two needful dictums of us “in Christ” and Christ “in us” (Rom 8:10; Gal 2:20).

Finally, you will have to embrace the fear of the Lord.

“Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” (Matt 4:8-10)

The god of the world, whose lieutenant elsewhere is called mammon, promises Jesus the whole world, if He would “worship” him. As Nouwen points out, among the three temptations used by the devil to tempt Jesus in the wilderness, this was the “temptation to power.” Yet the way of Jesus and of His leadership is not through the will to power. It is a rise to leadership that rather comes through taking the low place. It is the way of taking the servant’s role, the place of the child. It is through way of the servant and the child, because only through this way, can the Father lead Jesus.

It is thus not an active-tense paradigm of leading, but rather of a passive-tense paradigm of leading. It is thus a way that is not best described as leading, but rather of—being led. Right there in the desert, Jesus therefore established His whole way of leadership—servant-leadership. It was to be the way not of upward mobility, but of “downward mobility, ending on the cross.” Nouwen perceptibly draws the application: “The Christian leader . . . needs to be radically poor, journeying with nothing except a staff . . . (Mark 6:8). For only through embracing the process of becoming poor in the eyes of this world order, can we discover Jesus’ “giving” style of leadership.

This is a style, which in the Gospels, Jesus calls, servant-leadership. And through it we foremost learn that the greatest need we have as leaders, is not in knowing how to lead, but in how to be led, “by allowing ourselves to be led.” So what Jesus’ reply to the devil signified was that he was further entering into his kenosis. Right there in the desert He was further emptying Himself of all his heavenly glory, that He may model trust in the Father alone. So right there, Jesus goes back in time to where Adam fell. But where the first Adam failed, the second Adam succeeded, for “he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death upon a cross.” (Phil 2:8). He lost his life that He may find it again for all mankind.

This reflection naturally infers why we must embrace the “fear of the Lord.” It should naturally empower us to realise that the grace-touched life is a life thoroughly lived out in the “fear of the Lord.” For to become a servant-leader like Jesus, we must realise that too often in this present age, “Wealth and riches prevent us from truly discerning the way of Jesus.”

So in reply to the devil, Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 6:13, “You shall fear the Lord your God and serve only him.” Now what does it mean to “fear the Lord,” other than to worship Him alone? To fear the Lord is to reverence God. Reverence is giving God space to be God in our life. Reverence, fear, worship— it all means the same thing. To fear God means that we trust not in ourselves, but trust our entire existence into the hands of God.

Reverence, the fear of the Lord, is no less or more than letting God be God! We let go and

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68 Nouwen, In the Name of Jesus, 62.
70 Nouwen, In the Name of Jesus, 64.
let God be God! To fear God means that we longer strive to achieve and attain, but we let go and let God lead us. We surrender to the flow of His grace.

“Trust me to turn My hand upon you and remove the boulder that has choked your river-bed, and take away all the sand that has silted up the channel. . . . I will perfect that which concerns you. Fear not, O child of My love; fear not.”

“Beloved, Let us love. ‘Lord, what is love?’ ‘Love is that which inspired My life, and led Me to My Cross, and held Me on my Cross.’ ‘Lord, evermore give us this love.’

Blessed are they which hunger and thirst after love, for they shall be filled.\footnote{Carmichael, \textit{It}, 82.}