



An Open Letter to Grace Believers

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*A*s a second generation grace believer, I grew up learning the Word of God rightly divided. Over the past many years I've come to rejoice in these truths as I've learned more through study. As a grace believer, I was taught to be a Berean and search the Scriptures through personal Bible study to see if what is being taught from the pulpit is true (Acts 17:10-11).

In the spirit of being a Berean, and in light of my desire over the years to apply the doctrine I've learned, my thinking concerning many issues has changed. One could say that I've had a paradigm shift in my understanding. Many of my core beliefs remain the same, but my perspective on these core beliefs has changed. Other beliefs I once held to be true I no longer hold to at all. It is my desire to share my current understanding of issues and to challenge grace believers to consider possible errors that exist in doctrine and practice within the grace movement.

A big change has occurred in my understanding that doesn't have so much to do with a change of doctrine but a change in emphasis. While I still believe in the basic truths of right division (II Timothy 2:15), I no longer desire to identify myself by these truths. I want to see myself in Christ only and not identified with a specific group who holds to specific doctrines. As grace believers we pride ourselves in the fact that we are not a denomination, and yet we are a denomination when we exclude from fellowship all those who do not hold to our understanding of Scripture. Not only do I want to see myself as who I am in Christ, I want to begin seeing other believers simply on the basis of who they are in Christ. I don't want to treat fellow believers in Christ in relation to a denomination they belong to. Our intellect should not be the basis of fellowship. We all have different levels of intellectual understanding, but that doesn't change the fact that we are one Body in Christ. If a believer has trusted Christ as their Savior, and they are not seeking to cause division, I see no reason to exclude myself from them, even from regular fellowship.

It used to be that whenever I met a non-grace believer, I sought to teach them the Word of God rightly divided. In fact, it was the basis of the relationship. I don't want to be like this anymore. I desire to love them like Christ does and let that be the basis of fellowship with

them and rejoice with them concerning our hope in Christ. I still enjoy sharing with people my understanding of Scripture, but it is not the driving force. Love should be the issue above all else. I Corinthians 13 says if I understand all mysteries (this includes the mystery revealed to Paul) and have not charity, I'm nothing. I want to focus on two things in my Christian life: loving God, and loving others. If I understand all the doctrinal details of the Word of God rightly divided but don't learn to love God and others in my daily experience, then I've missed it. If I do learn to love God and others and I lack some doctrinal understanding, then I've focused on the more excellent way.

I believe we are doing ourselves a great disservice by cutting ourselves off from most of the Body of Christ. We do so presumably for doctrinal reasons. Staying to ourselves without regular fellowship with non-grace believers is denominationalism. It's a religious attitude. We should not limit our fellowship to those who have the same intellectual understanding as us. The apostle Paul did not teach this. In fact, Paul encouraged unity among those with different or even false doctrinal ideas. Romans 14: 1 tells us to receive those who are "*weak in the faith.*" Paul then goes on to describe those who are weak in the faith. There are some who did not think they could eat meat. This is a major doctrinal error (I Timothy 4:3, 4). He also describes someone who holds to religious days. Paul warns of this doctrinal error in Galatians (4:10) and Colossians (2:16). However, he does not tell us to mark them and avoid them. We see the principle of charity again here. Verse 15 says "... *If any brother be grieved with thy meat, now waiketh thou not **charitably**. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died.*" Also in verse 19 he says "*Let us therefore follow after the things which make for **peace**, and things wherewith one may **edify** another.*" Paul did not tell those who had proper understanding to leave the assembly and start another one. There is a reason why Ephesians 4:3 says we should endeavor "... *to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*" Paul knew the propensity to division. We need to *work* at unity rather than dividing every time we disagree over doctrine. Grace believers end up rightly dividing believers right out of the Body of Christ. This is wrong division.

Usually, verses like Romans 16:17-18 are used to support the idea that we should separate from those who do not agree with our understanding of the doctrine. "*Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple.*" The people referred to here are not your average denominational believers sitting in the pew. Verse 15 says these people do not serve the Lord. Are we willing to admit that the only people who serve the Lord are grace believers? The verse continues by saying that they actively deceive people for financial gain. "*For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision: Whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, **for filthy lucre's sake***" (Titus 1:10-11).

Paul goes on to describe these people. "*Unto the pure all things are pure: but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure; but even their mind and conscience is defiled. They profess that they know God; but in works they deny Him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate*" (Titus 1:15, 16). This is not a reference to people who simply don't understand some doctrinal issue like those in Romans 14. There is a

big difference between people who are actively deceiving people and those who simply lack some understanding. I honestly believe that a grace believer who has a high level of doctrinal understanding can be guilty of causing division by their actions. In other words, causing divisions is contrary to the doctrine because the doctrine encourages unity.

Paul urges us to follow after godliness “... *with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart*” (II Timothy 2:22). Are grace believers the only ones that call on the Lord or who have a pure heart? We should follow godliness with any believer who desires to also walk according to godliness. Those who do not have a pure heart are those mentioned in I Timothy 6:5, “... *supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself.*” This is not referring to those who believe that God might bless them if they are living Godly. In the context, it’s referring to those of “... *corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth*” (I Timothy 6:5). In verse 10 of the same chapter it says they covet money. I am well aware that many believers think God might or could bless them if they are living Godly. I believe this is false doctrine, but they fall into the category of immature or ignorant brethren, not those who are deceivers or corrupt.

Lest anyone misunderstand, I am not speaking here of ecumenicalism which teaches that doctrine is not important, and encourages unity even among unbelievers. I’m referring to unity within the Body of Christ. They believe in unity at the expense of truth. I’m talking about speaking the truth in love, and allowing that truth to work by love among all true believers in Christ.

I would like to deal with an argument I’ve heard against what I’m saying concerning unity in the Body of Christ. The argument states that all of the believers during Paul’s day were grace believers. Paul could encourage unity among the brethren because they all held to his gospel. However, we know that there was disagreement among the believers at the time concerning doctrine as seen in Romans 14. I Corinthians:12-14 is also a good section to show that there was tremendous ignorance among the believers at Corinth. Paul did not instruct the more mature believer to depart from them and start another group. He encouraged unity despite ignorance. The same kind of thing can be seen in Galatians. There were some even teaching that believers needed to be circumcised, certainly not a grace teaching. Despite the confusion and ignorance, Paul encouraged unity.

In Ephesians 4:1-6, Paul deals with this issue of unity. The one unity mentioned here that grace believers focus on is the one baptism. They will say this one spirit baptism must be agreed upon for there to be unity. I do not believe this. Paul is saying there is one baptism for all believers whether they understand it or not. It’s a statement of fact. If I choose to fellowship with a non-grace believer, I am keeping that unity we all possess in Christ. If they choose not to fellowship with me because I do not believe in being water baptized then they are the ones who are not holding to the one unity in Christ. In other words, both sides can be guilty of not keeping the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

As I said earlier, my desire is to see all true believers simply on the basis of who they are in Christ. I want to rid myself of a religious mind set where believers are categorized into denominational boxes. I don’t want to have an us-against-them mentality. I do not consider myself a dispensationalist anymore. I have some beliefs that align with dispensationalism, but

it is not my identity. My identity used to be wrapped up in my beliefs about right division. I no longer feel compelled to label myself this way. Identifying myself in Christ is sufficient. Any fellowship I may have with believers who hold certain similar doctrines does not define who I am as a believer.

As I stated at the beginning of this paper, I have undergone a sort of paradigm shift in my thinking. Part of this change in thinking is due to a change in emphasis. While many of my core beliefs are the same, I choose not to rally around any particular verse or set of doctrines. As I said before, my two great objectives for my Christian life is to love God and others. I want all other doctrines to revolve around these two great themes. I want to focus on what Paul says in Galatians 5:14, "*For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.*" I don't want to make right division to be the great issue upon which all others revolve. I want right division to be an issue but one that does not control or define my Christian life. If other believers do not understand right division, I should not reject and avoid them as I tended to do in the past. I now desire to receive them "... *but not to doubtful disputations*" (Romans 14:1). To dispute means to argue.

Webster's 1828 dictionary defines dispute this way: "to attempt to disprove by arguments or statements; to attempt to prove to be false, unfounded or erroneous; to controvert; to attempt to overthrow by reasoning." I don't want to talk to non-grace believers just to argue with them to try to prove them wrong. Paul says in Romans 14:4, 5, "*Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand. One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.*" Must I think it's my duty to convince believers to my way of thinking even if it is the truth? The point is not that I don't speak truth to them. The issue is that I don't make our disagreements the basis of our relationship. Since all believers are one in Christ, this must be the basis above all else.

In his book *Climb the Highest Mountain*, Gene Edwards writes about the battle that raged between Luther and Zwingli during the reformation in the 16th century. Zwingli had refused to join the Lutheran movement which caused Luther to find fault with him, both personally and doctrinally. He writes about the fact that there were fourteen issues considered between them and they agreed on all of them except the last half of the fourteenth point. So they agreed on thirteen and a half points while disagreeing on half of a point. The issue they disagreed on concerned the Lord's Supper. Luther's response to Zwingli was, "You have a different spirit from ours." Rather than viewing Zwingli as a brother in Christ and having fellowship with him on that basis, Luther caused division by putting this one doctrine above their oneness in Christ. I have been guilty of the same thing. I used to view believers in relation to their errors in belief (or at least the perceived errors). We all have errors in doctrine. Should we allow faulty human reasoning to be the basis of our oneness, or should we allow the *fact* of our oneness be the basis? I believe it should be the latter.

I would like to briefly discuss how I have come to believe that the system or religion of dispensationalism has caused me to focus on the wrong thing. A few months ago I was reading I Thessalonians where it talks about the rapture. I've always thought about the rapture verses in connection with the dispensational chart. I sometimes have read these verses

wondering if the system of thought about the rapture is correct. Recently, as I considered this it occurred to me I don't have to have a system at all. Why can't I simply read and rejoice over the verses that talk about the trumpet sounding and the body of Christ being caught up to ever be with Him? It seems that before, my reading of the verses were veiled, so to speak, because my focus was on the dispensational chart and where it all fits. That veil is being lifted thankfully. I can't say it's wrong to have a belief about the timing of events but it is such a secondary issue. I want to learn to rejoice in these truths and not make a religion out of it as I have done in the past.

Another thing about dispensationalism as religion is that, in my experience, it has tended to cause me not to be objective when reading the doctrine. I always read the Scriptures through a dispensational lens. I was not open to other legitimate views of God's Word. It caused me to become dogmatic and even frustrated and angry when others questioned my view. This was a religious attitude. This religious attitude causes one to judge and condemn all those who have "departed" from the doctrine. I no longer want to be identified with this attitude. It's an oppressive and restricting mind set that is not consistent with the love and liberty of Christ.

Something else I'm learning is not to be too quick to judge others who still see things the way I used to because I can't see their heart. The rapture issue is a good example. My dispensational focus caused me to not rejoice in these verses like I otherwise could have but I can't say that others who are dispensationally oriented do not rejoice like they should. Maybe they do. I don't have to be concerned about judging their heart in these matters. Like Romans 14:4 says, "*Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? To his own master he standeth or falleth.*" While some believers may judge me or avoid fellowship with me, I don't have to respond in kind.

Let me say that I have learned much from grace believers over the years. Many of them are very gracious and loving people. I have enjoyed wonderful times of fellowship. I hope to continue friendships and acquaintances with grace people for many years to come. I also want to continue to develop my friendships with non-grace believers as well for the reasons I've mentioned thus far. I have learned things from non-grace people too, and have had wonderful times of fellowship. There are many gracious and loving non-grace believers who have been a real blessing to me, and I hope to be a blessing to them as well. I believe it would be a terrible mistake for me to mark and avoid these dear brethren. We are one in Christ, and I want to rejoice with them in this unity.

There is another issue that I feel compelled to address. It's a subject that has consumed vast amounts of my time [in consideration and mediation]. It's been a real struggle dealing with the issue in my mind and life. The issue concerns how we are built up and established as mature believers today in the dispensation of grace. It is taught that the way a believer is perfected is by storing an edifice of sound doctrine in the soul. The degree to which we have sound doctrine resident in our mind is the degree to which we can live the Christian life. It is further stated that the written Word of God is the only mechanism needed by Christ to mature the believer. As a result, an emphasis is placed on the intake of factual data from the Scriptures. Therefore, the local assembly is structured like a classroom for the systematic study of the written Word of God. The learning of doctrine becomes a cerebral exercise where the application of one's intellect to the Scriptures is paramount. In this context, feelings and experience are presented

in a negative light. While it is stated that feelings and experience have their place, they are generally viewed as dangerous when spoken of in relation to learning doctrine. Furthermore, the members of the Body of Christ are usually viewed as only incidental to the growth of the individual. Fellowship among believers is encouraged but Christ's Body is not seen as necessary for the edification of the individual. It is stated quite emphatically that Christ in us is sufficient.

I used to believe that living the Christian life was simply a matter of learning all of the required doctrine and then believing it to be true so that it would become operative in my life. I have often heard the mind compared to a computer. What you put into it is what you get out. The fact is, our minds are not computers that just take in information. We are human beings that are far too complex to reduce our Christian life to a mere formula. Every individual is unique and we all have different strengths and weaknesses. Our ability to learn and use the doctrine will depend on many factors such as our background, experience, personality, etc. The doctrine should not be divorced from who we are as individuals. The classroom mentality of learning doctrine fails to recognize the need for experience and failure to mature the believer. I believe failure is an important aspect to our growth. Rather than victory over sin being the result of taking in doctrine, it is the result of taking in doctrine and then failing. The doctrine needs to be worked into our soul through the trials, temptations, and struggles we encounter in life. If a person doesn't understand this process, it will cause them to have an unrealistic expectation of how the doctrine works.

Doctrine, especially sanctification truths, cannot be learned solely by sitting in a pew listening to a preacher expound the Word of God or simply by reading the Bible faithfully everyday. This is only a small part of the process. We are not perfected or matured by just taking in facts from the Bible. The attainment of a certain level of doctrinal understanding is not THE answer to living the Christian life. Consider Romans 7. Paul reveals in this chapter that he is struggling with sin in his life. As Paul is writing these very words, he is admitting his struggle. Normally when this passage is preached it is stated that the answer to this struggle is to move on to live Romans 8 truth, but when Paul wrote Romans 7, he already would have known Romans 8, and yet he is still struggling. The answer is not learning factual data from Scriptures. I have often heard the lament that if only we had enough faith to believe what Paul wrote then it would work in our lives. Certainly Paul knew and believed the doctrine yet he still struggled with sin. Paul had to go through many experiences and failures to grow in Christ.

One of the problems associated with the classroom style of learning is that it exalts one man above the other members of Christ's body. When we gather together, we do so in order to listen to one man speak. However, other members of the Body of Christ are just as necessary for the edification of the believer as is the "pastor." While we may say we believe in the importance of every member, we deny it in practice by putting all of our focus and attention on one man. All members of the Body are needed. If this is true, why then do we gather together to listen and learn from only one member? What about the brother sitting next to you in the pew? When does he get the chance to minister to you, and you to him? I've heard it said that fellowship before and after the service accomplishes this. But in my experience, fellowship is nothing more than a social time where there is little more than small talk. The Scripture's mandate of bearing each others' burdens rarely seems to occur. This brings me to the second aspect of maturing in Christ.

I believe we need to begin viewing the edification process of an individual believer in the context of the Body of Christ. We need to learn the written doctrine, but that very doctrine in I Corinthians 12:21, 22 teaches that we need each other. Other members of the Body of Christ are necessary to our edification. I know this because this is what Paul says in I Corinthian 12. I have heard it said that relying on other believers is not right because it leads to a co-dependant relationship. Is this a bad thing? Is this not what Paul teaches? If Paul in I Corinthians 12, among other passages, is not teaching a co-dependency among members of the Body of Christ, then what is he teaching? I have heard it argued that to rely on something or someone other than Christ and His Word is to deny the sufficiency of Christ. There is no doubt about it. Christ is sufficient, but Christ doesn't work in me exclusively to accomplish His purpose. **He works through His Body!** The believer is not only established by the epistles of Paul, but also by the *"living epistles"* spoken of in II Corinthians 3:2, 3. The usual pat answer as to how Christ works is that He works through His Word. Yes, but the written Word is only the vehicle to convey information that should be a living reality such as truth concerning our families and the Body of Christ. To say that all we need is the written Word of God for spiritual growth and maturity is to say we need neither our families nor Christ's Body; but both are essential to our spiritual health.

I believe it is wrong to speak of the edification and maturity of an individual believer apart from the other members of Christ's Body. We fail to realize how united we are as members of the Body of Christ. The Lord is edifying the Body, not isolated individuals. I believe we have been influenced more than we realize by the individualistic mind set of our culture which emphasizes personal growth. Sanctification truths are usually presented to believers as a way to have personal growth in their relationship with the Lord. The emphasis on the individual denies in practice the need that the individual has for other members of the Body of Christ. Ephesians 4:16 says, *"From whom the **whole Body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the Body unto the edifying of itself in love.**"* The context of this verse reveals that Christ is the head of the Body. It's true that each individual Body member is connected to the Head, but the edifying doesn't take place apart from the Body. Rather, the edifying is to occur within the confines of a living, loving relationship with one another and not just sitting in a pew taking in information.

The question has been asked about a situation where a believer lives somewhere with no fellowship. What about them? My response is that they would lack. They would lack the necessary edifying. The same would be true for a believer who does not have access to the Bible. They will lack. I say this because this is what Paul teaches. However, I find it difficult to believe that a person, especially in this country, could live somewhere where they could not find other believers to fellowship with.

The fact can't be ignored or denied: we need each other! I don't think we realize just how united we are as believers in Christ. Our relationships are vital. **Until we realize how important we are to one another and seek to nurture that relationship, we will never grow up into Christ as we should!** The relationships we have to the members of Christ's Body is not an incidental matter. In fact, it is central to all we are and all we do in the dispensation of grace. Yet how sadly lacking it is! If we know a brother or sister in Christ is hurting in some way, we

should act the same way we would act if we cut off one of our fingers. There would be nothing more important to you than to stop the pain and bleeding. At the time, any other thing in life would become secondary until the problem was dealt with. The same should be true when dealing with a fellow Body member who is hurting in some way. That hurting believer should be the most important person when they are in pain just as an injured or missing finger would be most important. All other considerations should become secondary, such as sitting in a pew, “church” activities, and even the preaching. It’s a religious exercise to come to “church” every Sunday and take your place in a pew, sing a few songs, listen to the announcements, hear the preacher, and then go home. As a grace believer, I did all the stuff religion does but thought I was so different just because I believed a little differently than most. Also, it is very comfortable to talk to other believers about our oneness in doctrine, but it becomes very uncomfortable to deal with real life problems. It’s easy to tell someone to read their Bible, but not so easy to bear our brother’s burden.

It is commonly taught that if a believer faithfully studies the Bible they can learn the doctrine needed for growth and maturity. However, I don’t believe this to be true. No matter how much I study my Bible, there are certain truths that I will never understand or even occur to me. This is why I need other Body members to learn God’s truth and to learn the skill of applying it in my daily experience. The reason why I can’t learn all of the doctrine on my own is because I am only one member of the Body. Christ doesn’t just work in one member. He works through the whole Body to teach His truth and to accomplish His purpose.

We have a far too individualistic concept of living the Christian life. The hymns we sing are a good example of how we think about this issue. Consider the hymn “*I Must Tell Jesus*.” The first verse reads, “I must tell Jesus all of my trials; I cannot bear these burdens alone”, and then the third verse reads, “Tempted and tried, I need a great Saviour, One who can help my burdens to bear.” I find it interesting that nowhere in Paul’s writings does it say that Jesus will bear our burdens. It says, “Bear ye **one another’s** burdens ...” The last part of the chorus of the song says, “I must tell Jesus! I must tell Jesus! Jesus can help me, Jesus alone.” Jesus alone!!! If Jesus is the only one who can bear our burdens, then why the command by Paul to bear one another’s burdens? There’s another popular hymn we sing called “*Where Could I Go?*” which says, “Where could I go but to the Lord?” How about going to the Body of Christ? Isn’t the way Christ edifies us accomplished through the Body of Christ? Yes, God works through His Word, but that’s only part of the truth.

It seems to me that we teach that if a believer understands the passages where Paul talks about the working of the Body of Christ then that is sufficient. In other words, as long as we understand that we need one another then we really don’t need one another. As long as we have the pattern of doctrine about our need for one another in our head, but we don’t actually have to have it work. Grace believers have told me that ultimately, all we need is the doctrine. We really don’t need each other. I couldn’t disagree more. We as humans were made for relationship. I have heard stories of people who have been separated from human contact and they go mad, such as people in prison who are in solitary confinement. Human relationships are a basic human need and the Lord knows this, He made us this way. I don’t believe He ever intended the doctrine to be divorced from human relationships.

There is so much more that I could say about these issues. I don't mean to be exhaustive in this letter. There is no way to answer every question or verse someone might bring up. I'm sure someone may find errors in what I have said, or I might have said something incorrect. Please don't let that get in the way of understanding my basic message. I have intentionally not mentioned anyone by name, and I have sought to avoid pointing any fingers. I have strived to mention things from my experience. Others' experiences might be different and I have tried to respect that in this letter. As I said earlier, I know and love many grace believers. This letter is not intended to speak against anyone in particular. Rather, it is intended to show, from my experience, how I believe the grace movement has become just another denomination.

Dispensationalism is a form of religion to me anymore. I now seek to make loving God and loving others the issue in my Christian life. Dispensationalism to me was first in my life and other issues secondary. I now want dispensationalism to be secondary and the love of God working in me to be primary. I want to be identified in Christ and His love only, not [with] dispensationalism, not [with] the KJV, or any other doctrine. I still believe these things, but I don't want my identity to be there anymore. Furthermore, I don't want to judge other believers as to their doctrine according to Romans 14. As long as they are not causing division, I don't want to look down on them and think that it's my job to convince them of their error. No, I want to love them first. I don't want to have an oppressive, dogmatic, religious attitude towards them as I tended to have in the past. I want to love them according to the doctrine and if there is some doctrine that I can impart to them that would benefit them, then I will do so. I want to love them with the doctrine. I want the focus of my life henceforth to be to fulfill the law of Christ. *"Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ"* (Galatians 6:2). Is there a higher law or truth? How can a believer go wrong when this is their goal? If I learn to fulfill this one law, despite any deficiencies in other areas of doctrine, I have lived the Christian life as Christ intended.

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