

The Deep Reach of Amazing Grace

BY STEPHEN N. JOHNSON

© 2013 Nurturing Faith Inc.

Published in the United States by Nurturing Faith Inc., Macon GA, www.nurturingfaith.net.

ISBN 978-1-938514-26-5

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America

Unless otherwise noted all Scripture quotations taken from the New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation Used by permission.” (www.Lockman.org).

Scripture quotations taken from the New English Bible, copyright © Cambridge University Press and Oxford University Press 1961, 1970. All rights reserved.

Endorsements

Steve Johnson is a compelling and moving voice for rescuing Christianity from the ravages of the contemporary church. The reader is not left to read between the lines. Indeed, he writes with candor and stunning clarity. His description of God's grace will be startling to many because of his refusal to allow human boundaries and an array of performance requirements and expectations, which the institutional church tries to impose, to undermine or to veil the sheer wonder and simplicity of the grace embodied by Jesus and which carries no conditions or limitations.

—R. Kirby Godsey
Chancellor, Mercer University

Steve Johnson belongs to the Baptist tribe. We talk grace and walk works. Johnson, on the other hand, talks and walks a grace so revolutionary that it offends us religious. Read this book, and I promise that you will at some point murmur: “Come on, Steve, you don't really believe . . .”, “Yeah, but . . .”, “Are you actually saying that . . .?”. And, yes, he actually has his heart wrapped around a sweeping, drastic, radical grace. It is a radical grace that issues into radical works.

—Walter B. Shurden
Minister at Large
Mercer University

The Deep Reach of Amazing Grace is a powerful and inviting exploration of the “God of outlandish grace.” Johnson combines meticulous analysis of scripture, with a willingness to look at his own beliefs and behavior with humility. He tells powerful stories from his experiences and calls on a vast range of sources—literary, philosophical, and Biblical—to carefully examine contemporary issues of religion and faith. The result is a compelling book. While I am neither a Christian nor a religious person, Steve Johnson writes in a way to make Jesus most appealing and the Christian faith both intellectually understandable and personally winsome.

—Jane Bolgatz, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Fordham University, Graduate School of Education
Author of *Talking Race in the Classroom* (Teachers College Press, 2005)

About the Author

Stephen N. Johnson is an ordained Baptist minister and a veteran pastor of over forty years. He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from Mercer University and a Master of Divinity degree from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is the founder and president of Reformation Ministries, Inc. (www.refmin.org), begun because “It’s Time For A New Reformation.” Steve is dedicated to the proclamation of the wonders of God’s grace. He and his wife, Connie, live in Macon, Georgia. They have one son, John Stephen and two daughters, Carrie Elizabeth and Kathryn Suzanne. Contact Steve at stevermi@cox.net.

Contents

Preface	v
Foreword	ix
Chapter 1	
The Gospel According to Jesus	1
Chapter 2	
Sola Gratia! Sola Fide! Solus Christus!	19
Chapter 3	
Why Did Jesus Die?	33
Chapter 4	
Hell in the Fire	51
Chapter 5	
The “Way” of Salvation	69
Chapter 6	
When Religion Goes Bad	89
Chapter 7	
The Error of Inerrancy	107
Chapter 8	
“I Believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth” ... And in Evolution	125

Chapter 9	
God, the Gospel, and Gays	143
Chapter 10	
The Greatest Challenge Facing the Church Today: Believing the Gospel	161
Chapter 11	
Grace Above All. Then, More Grace	179
Epilogue	197
Works Cited	199

Preface

THE CHURCH IS LOSING. People on the outside consider it either irrelevant or dangerous. People on the inside are leaving. This is not always the result of contemporary and vocal atheists such as Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins nor the pervasive secularism of our culture. The hard times the church faces today are largely the church's own making. The church has forfeited the message of Jesus—a message of incredible good news—for the trappings of religion that fail to win minds and meet the deep needs of the human heart. Too often, the church presents a religion that is superficial, inconsistent, and incompatible. Putting it bluntly, many find it repugnant.

The faith of Jesus Christ has remained vibrant for over two thousand years because the truths Jesus taught touch and transform the human heart, offering joy in good times and hope amid desperate times. In a harsh and hostile world, Jesus' message of God's love and grace has brought understanding, consolation, instruction, hope and peace to hearts and nations. Because of His life and message, Jesus survives the denials of popular atheists, the debates of the academy, and the distortions of the modern church.

So what is going wrong?

Survey after survey reveals that Americans take their faith seriously and value a vibrant spiritual life. These surveys, however, reveal that many of these same people are repulsed by the contemporary church, and for good reason. Summarizing an exhaustive research project, David Kinnaman, president of The Barna Group (a leading Christian research organization), summarizes:

The research shows that Christians are best known for what they are against. They are perceived as being

judgmental, anti-homosexual, and too political. And young people are quick to point out that they believe that *Christianity is no longer as Jesus intended*. It is unChristian.¹

The message of Jesus Christ has been eclipsed in the modern church in the United States. The New Testament gospel, the genuine “good news,” is no longer the message of His church. It has substituted other things such as Christian doctrine (right belief) and Christian ethics (right behavior) and the endless ancillary demands that accompany both. The church now stresses secondary matters, emphasizes tertiary matters, and diminishes the one primary matter: the pure, unalloyed, unadulterated gospel of the grace of God. By substituting lesser stuff for the wonder of God’s grace, the church has lost its greatest distinctive characteristic and a message that can transform the human heart.

Three new terms have entered the religious/sociological lexicon: “de-converts,” those who have abandoned the Christian faith; “leavers,” those who have been raised in the church and are now leaving; and “nones,” those who when asked their religious faith answer, “None.” The modern church is losing people by the millions.

John, the “beloved disciple,” concluded the marvelous prologue to his Gospel with these revealing words:

No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, *He has explained Him*” [emphasis mine] (John 1:18).

According to John, Jesus came to explain God the Father. Read the Gospel of John and the other three Gospels. What Jesus “explained” is that above all else, God is a God of amazing and outlandish grace, a grace that reaches far down, far out, and forever. (I refer back to this pivotal verse throughout the book and when doing so render the word “explained” in quotes.)

I have been a churchman all my life. The church birthed me into knowledge of Jesus Christ and instilled in me a deep and abiding faith and spiritual strength that has enabled me to navigate life’s inevitable storms. I have given my life to pastoring the church and studying and preaching the Bible. The church of Jesus Christ is the greatest single

source for good and giving the world has ever seen. Yet today, because the church has left its primary message, the church is in serious trouble.

The Deep Reach of Amazing Grace reminds us how winsome the life of Jesus can be for our times. It clears away the dead brush and prickly briars of a misunderstood and misrepresented Christianity (sometimes even orthodox Christianity). It calls us to a clear understanding of the New Testament faith for this day, a faith “explained” by Jesus of Nazareth. It presents the timeless gospel that can transform our lives. For those who have left the church, I agree with you wholeheartedly that some churches need to be left. For those disgusted with the church, I urge you to hang in there and help make the Christian church more Christ-like. To those rejected by the church, I apologize that we were not more like Christ. To all my fellow “ragamuffins” needing “a handout of amazing grace,” *The Deep Reach of Amazing Grace* explores the profound richness of the outlandish grace of God. I pray that you will feast at His table and find strength, hope, insight, and encouragement.

¹David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity...and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007) dust jacket.

Foreword

Steve Johnson is a compelling and moving voice for rescuing Christianity from the ravages of the contemporary church. The reader is not left to read between the lines. Indeed, he writes with candor and stunning clarity. His description of God's grace will be startling to many because of his refusal to allow human boundaries and an array of performance requirements and expectations, which the institutional church tries to impose, to undermine or to veil the sheer wonder and simplicity of the grace embodied by Jesus and which carries no conditions or limitations.

The Deep Reach of Amazing Grace offers a radically personal and explicit statement on the meaning of grace and the tragic distortions of the gospel within the contemporary Christian church. With both courage and grace, Steve Johnson approaches and addresses some of the most difficult and controversial issues that have plagued and often crippled the church and driven away countless believers—for example, the meaning of hell, the church's abhorrent history of failure with respect to gays and lesbians, and the tragic failure of leadership of broad segments of the established church in dismantling the evils of segregation.

Only a person who has experienced the "deep grace" that sets you free could compose such an intelligent and passionate description of the meaning of God's grace.

Dr. R. Kirby Godsey
Chancellor, Mercer University