

Book Review

Steve McVey. *Grace Walk*. Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 1995, 188 pp..

The basic thesis of *Grace Walk* is that Christians should live by grace and not by legalism. Believers do this not by trying to conform to external rules (not even basic disciplines like having quiet times, reading the Bible, or attending church) but by resting in the fact that, as believers, Christ lives in them. On the surface there are parts of this approach that may sound appealing. Certainly all true believers will heartily agree that we are saved by grace through faith and not by works. One might also heartily “Amen!” McVey’s denunciation of any notion of self-sufficiency when it comes to the Christian life. With careful examination and reflection, however, the reader will find that McVey has taken some major detours from the classical Biblical doctrines of salvation and sanctification. Unfortunately, McVey’s theology leads in the dangerous direction of antinomianism, hardly the healing Biblical cure for legalism. Rather than offering a robust Biblical critique of the spirit of this age, *Grace Walk* conforms to the mold of this world by promoting a relativistic Jesus-spirituality that downplays any firm doctrinal commitments about who that Jesus is.

Grace Walk begins with McVey’s autobiographical account of how he came to this spiritual breakthrough. He describes moving from a successful pastorate in Alabama to a church in Atlanta that he expected successfully to turn around.¹ To his surprise, however, after a year of standard church growth efforts his new church had actually experienced numerical decline: “For the first time in my seventeen years of ministry, a church I served had declined in attendance during my first year. I was appalled!” (13). This “failure” drove McVey to a spiritual breakdown in 1990 and to the realization that he had been relying on his own self-sufficiency. He credits this watershed moment of being spiritually broken with his turn-around. He is less clear in relaying how his church received his new insights and why he chose to leave this pastorate and to begin this para-church ministry.

We might pause here to say that there is much in McVey’s story that is laudable. It sounds as though he, like many other pastors, has come to a genuine sense of dissatisfaction with the corporate and church growth methods that are currently being peddled in the evangelical church market. He is to be admired for sharing how efforts at growing his church numerically were more closely tied to his own ego gratification than to a genuine desire to bring glory to God. The problem rests in what McVey suggests as

¹ One of the quirks of McVey’s book is that although he freely shares the details of this spiritual crisis he never directly identifies the churches he served. He is no more forthcoming on his website. One might read the book and still be left unsure of his confessional background. Is he a Methodist? A Baptist? A Disciple of Christ? His ministry’s website does note that he is a graduate of Luther Rice Seminary, so we might surmise that he is Baptist. Of course, McVey also makes clear in the book that he has moved beyond denominationalism since, “no church or denomination is totally right or totally wrong” (161).

the appropriate response to the current state of evangelical church life: a decreased emphasis on doctrine and discipline (the latter he falsely labels as “legalism”).

We readily admit that McVey’s book is not put forward as a work of systematic theology. It is written at a popular level and does not seek a sophisticated level of doctrinal precision. It is, however, necessarily a work of practical theology, telling believers how they should think, believe, and act. Therefore, its theological claims must be taken seriously. Our examination of the doctrinal content of *Grace Walk* will fall into into four general areas: soteriology (the doctrine of salvation); antinomianism (law-lessness); relativism; and exegesis:

Soteriology

The first question we must ask concerns McVey’s views on salvation and the related doctrines of justification, imputation, and sanctification. Soteriology is by far the most complicated and confusing theme in McVey’s book. One of his cornerstone arguments is that when we become believers we possess the spirit of Christ and are, therefore, delivered from any human efforts to achieve godliness. He refers to this as “the exchanged life.”²

² More light is shed on McVey’s doctrinal background on his website. In the FAQ section (gracewalk.org/html.faq.php) he answers the question “What is the grace walk?” with reference to those whom he claims as his spiritual heirs:

Through the years various other believers have described the grace walk with other terms such as: *The Exchanged Life* (Hudson Taylor); *The Abiding Life* (Andrew Murray); *The Crucified Life* (L. E. Maxwell); *Life on the Highest Plane* (Ruth Paxson); *The Interior Life* (Hannah Whitall Smith); *The Normal Christian Life* (Watchman Nee); *The Victorious Christian Life* (Alan Redpath, Ian Thomas), and *The Miracle Life* (David Needham).

In other words, McVey bases his views on spirituality on a tradition of evangelical mysticism. It is interesting to note that in *Grace Walk* McVey makes mention of his involvement with another Atlanta based ministry called Grace Ministries International (pp. 65-66). This ministry’s website contains a FAQ that is nearly identical to McVey’s (see gmint.org/faq.htm).

It should be noted that McVey’s website also includes a doctrinal statement that includes the standard evangelical shibboleths like “innerancy.” It is ironic that the BGAV which has lambasted leaders in the Southern Baptist Convention for upholding innerancy have invited a purported inerrantist to speak at its annual meeting. As we shall see, however, McVey’s claims to innerancy are suspect. As the Evangelical Theological Society has learned in recent year with the controversy over “open-theism” one may give lip service to innerancy and still arrive at unorthodox theological conclusions.

McVey stresses that as believers we have a new identity in Christ; we are a new creation. The old man has died, and a new man has arrived. These are certainly ideas rooted in the Biblical theme of salvation as union with Christ. The problem comes with some of the things that McVey says alongside this. He implies that when one becomes a believer that the sin nature is completely obliterated. He says, “You [as a Christian] don’t have two natures. The only nature any Christian has is the nature of the Lord Jesus Himself” (56-57). This is the heart of his later arguments about Christians no longer needing to struggle against sin by the development of spiritual discipline.

McVey acknowledges that although Christians now have a new identity in Christ that they do not always act according to their new natures. He fends off the accusation that his view promotes Christian perfectionism: “This in no way means that you will live a life of sinless perfection” (63), but his views seem particularly open to that charge. It also leads him to take some decidedly anti-somatic, dualistic stances. McVey takes a tri-chotomist view of human nature, arguing, “you consist of three parts: body, soul, and spirit” (43). He further offers this rather Platonic assessment: “Someone has said that a person is a spirit who has a soul and lives in a body” (43). He approvingly quotes Bill Gillham: “We know that He [God] would never violate His own admonition by joining into union the old man and the new man inside your earthsuit” (63).³

Again, this notion of union with Christ becomes the bedrock for McVey’s argument that believers need not struggle with sin. He exudes, “God never intended for the Christian life to be a struggle” (70). The danger is that McVey is unfortunately departing from classical Biblical understandings of salvation. The Bible teaches that when one becomes a believer, he does indeed enjoy a different standing before God, having been justified by faith and having had the righteousness of Christ imputed to him (see Rom 4:5; 2 Cor 5:21). Nevertheless, he still must struggle with sin (see Rom 7:13-25). In the present age God draws believers into greater holiness in the process known as sanctification that does not end until by grace we enter into the final stage of glorification (see Rom 8:29-30). The great Reformers spoke of the believer’s present state as *simul iustus et peccator* (at the same time both justified and a sinner). Theologian Sinclair Ferguson notes that “the

³ In the book’s opening acknowledgement, McVey states up front that he is “especially grateful to Bill Gillham.” Gillham also wrote *Grace Walk*’s Forward in which he commends McVey for showing us “that God’s plan is for you and ‘the Spirit of Christ’ to cohabit our earthsuit and become dear, intimate friends as together we experience victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil” (10). Gillham is a former psychology professor and leader of Lifetime Guarantee Ministry (see gospelcom.net/lifetime). He has apparently had a strong influence in the formation of McVey’s “exchanged life” spirituality.

I for one am troubled by this notion of the body as an “earthsuit.” The Bible, unlike the sacred writings of many dualistic religions, does not have a negative view of human embodiment. Pre-fall creation is pronounced good (Gen 1:31). Jesus himself takes on flesh (John 1:14). The doctrine of the resurrection proclaims that the body (and not just the spirit) will be transformed (see 1 Cor 15:35-49).

Christian has died to sin in Christ's dying victory, but sin itself has not yet been destroyed. It remains sin still...."⁴

It appears that McVey, however, confuses the doctrines of justification, imputation, and sanctification. He argues:

God only *imputed* righteousness to Old Testament saints, but He *imparted* righteousness to you when you were saved. Imputing righteousness was a legal verdict, but imparting righteousness is a literal event that happens to New Testament saints. In these days of grace, Christians are literally given the righteousness of Christ. Lot had righteousness *credited* to him, but you had righteousness *created* in you when you were saved. Don't believe the lie that you are a worm. You are a butterfly (51).

This statement introduces several novel notions. First, McVey implies that salvation is qualitatively different in the Old Testament than in the New Testament. In so doing he seems to deny forensic justification and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ for New Testament believers. Second, his argument for "imparted righteousness" sounds very much like the Roman Catholic doctrine of "infused righteousness." Protestants have typically avoided any blending of justification and sanctification, but McVey deviates from this path. Most significantly, he does so with no appeal to supporting Biblical evidence.

Soteriology is a central issue in the creation of McVey's practical theology. His stress on the believer's ability to live above (if not without) sin due to his spiritual union with Christ, however, might be described as a revival of the error of Hymenaeus and Philetus. Paul condemned these two men in 2 Timothy 2:18 for "having strayed from the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past." In a similar way, one might say that McVey evinces an "over-realized eschatology" by saying that believers possess a status in the present age that allows them to live above sin. The Biblical perspective, in contrast, is that such a state will not be fully realized until the final stage of glorification.

Antinomianism

Second, McVey's theology suggests antinomian (law-lessness) tendencies. He asserts that if you are a believer whose identity has been totally changed to Christ-likeness then, in truth, you cannot really sin. You, therefore, no longer have to fret over breaking God's law or striving to obey God's law. In a quote borrowed from Bob George, he states:

In exactly the same way, God sees you as His new creature in Christ. Although you might not always act like a good butterfly—you might land on things you shouldn't, or forget you are a butterfly and crawl around with your old worm buddies—the truth of the matter is, you are never going to be a worm again! (48).

⁴ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Christian Life: A Doctrinal Introduction* (Edinburgh, U.K./Carlisle, Penn.: Banner of Truth Trust, 1981): 144. This book is recommended as a Biblically balanced corrective to McVey's theology.

In keeping with this idea, McVey attacks any notion that one must obey God's moral law. He makes little to no effort even to distinguish between Old Testament law and "the law of Christ" in the New Testament. For McVey Christians are completely free from the law. He describes all efforts to obey divine law as "legalism," since "any approach to Christian living that focuses on keeping rules as a means of experiencing victory or growing spiritually is *legalism*" (80).

In response we might point out that Biblical Christianity certainly does not encourage slavish legalism. Jesus was particularly harsh on the Pharisees on this matter! It would be wrong, however, to say that Jesus did not demand obedience to divine commands. In John 14:21 Jesus says, "He who has my commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me." The Bible does not encourage legalism, but it does encourage discipline and obedience. Discipline appears to be the missing word in McVey's theological system. Authentic Biblical discipline is not legalism.

We might note one example cited by McVey as he makes his argument. He describes a couple in his church who had struggled with consistency in attending the church's meetings and had made a commitment not to miss a single Sunday meeting of the church for one year. McVey's response: "I cringed inside as I listened" (80). He reflects: "It is certainly good for Christians to attend church, but they turned church attendance into a self-imposed law" (81). The question one would like to ask McVey is how he understands Hebrews 10:24-25, when the inspired author admonishes: "And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another and so much more as you see the Day approaching." In fact, it appears that McVey will have a difficult time with the Bible's constant exhortations, admonishments, and encouragements to believers to live disciplined, godly lives. Somehow McVey decided that his task as a Pastor was to liberate this couple from their desire to obey the spirit of Hebrews 10:24-25!

McVey's approach also encourages not the confrontation and rooting out of sin, but the ignoring of it. Again, he exudes, "We don't experience victory over the flesh by being preoccupied with it" (97). But what of Paul's admonish in Romans 8:13 that believers "mortify the deeds of the body" (KJV)? McVey does not seem to take seriously enough the enduring power of sin and man's sinful human tendencies even beyond his conversion.

At one point in the book, McVey does acknowledge that his theological system holds antinomian tendencies. He reflects: "As I began living my Christian life under grace, I wondered if I should be careful not to get out of balance with grace. I questioned whether or not pure grace might encourage me to sin" (117). In the end, however, he concludes that his "Grace Walk" has done more to motivate him "to live a godly lifestyle than a thousand laws could ever do" (117). This has obviously been a soft spot for McVey. On his website he offers a link to frequently asked questions, including "Does

grace lead to a lawless attitude in the Christian life?” in which he strongly denies antinomianism. Still, a close reading of *Grace Walk* raises grave questions in this area.

Relativism

Third, *Grace Walk* demonstrates a pronounced tendency toward relativism. Here more than anywhere else McVey seems to reflect the spirit of the age in which we live. In this vein, McVey titles one chapter “The Vice of Values.” For McVey, rules and values are a great evil, because they are merely social constructs. He states that “[e]very society defines right and wrong according to its own standards, and people’s lives are judged on the basis of conformity to those standards” (107). According to McVey, “God is not interested in systems of living. He is interested in relationships” (105).

McVey then draws this amazing relativistic conclusion: “The definitive question in the life of the believer is not, ‘Would it be wrong for me to do this?’ but, ‘Am I abiding in Christ at this moment?’” (109). Seeking shock value, he states, “I highly recommend that you give up your Christian values” (110). He adds, “Now I don’t measure my life by right and wrong. My aim is simply to abide in Christ. By doing that, issues of right and wrong become incidental” (111). Amazingly, McVey argues that “the desire to live right is an improper goal for the Christian” (113). Later, in a parable about “Mr. Law” and “Mr. Grace,” he concludes:

How can you enjoy your relationship to Jesus if you are always checking the rules to find out what you can and can’t do? He doesn’t care about rules. Right and wrong are incidental to Him. He loves you and wants you to enjoy His love and then Him right back! (117).

This is rank “situation ethics” and is at complete odds with the moral absolutes of Scripture. It places a subjective evaluation of one’s experience of Jesus over fixed moral law drawn from the Bible. My question for McVey would be this: Does your ethic then allow a believer, under certain circumstances, to procure an abortion, as long as she feels she is being true to her relationship to Christ? To engage in homosexual practice? To commit adultery? Biblical Christianity asserts that the prime question is, in fact, “Would it be wrong for me to do this, because it violates the unchanging Word of God?”

Given his rejection of moral absolutes, it comes as no surprise that McVey does not offer a high view of the authority of Scripture in the believer’s life. It seems that all propositional truth is suspect in McVey’s sight. He exudes, “It was only after I began to understand grace that I realized that God never intended that we should live by the Bible. We are to live by His life” (137). But, pray tell, how do we know of Christ’s life apart from the Bible? Just as he tells the anecdote of the couple who foolishly wanted to make a commitment to disciplined church attendance, McVey also includes an anecdote about a poor soul named “Mark” who wanted to begin a consistent plan of Bible reading but, thankfully, McVey disabused him of the notion that he needed “his neat list of commandments” (129). Just think what he could have done with poor Timothy when

Paul exhorted him “to devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture” (1 Tim 4:13 NIV)!

In this relativistic vein, McVey also stresses that the believer is to be completely non-judgmental. He reflects, “One walking in grace accepts people on the basis of unconditional love” (158). He does defer that this does not mean “blanket approval for all behavior” but insists that “grace allows one to accept and love others regardless of their actions. Legalists set out to change what people *do*. Grace looks beyond what others do and affirms them for who they *are*, encouraging them to live up to their identity” (158). Unfortunately, this sounds more like modern pop psychology than Biblical truth. Jesus forgave the woman taken in adultery, but he also told her to go and sin no more (John 8:11). In other words, by McVey’s definition, Jesus was a legalist, since he told the woman to change what she was doing as part of changing who she was becoming. This necessarily leaves no room for church discipline, since “[c]ondemnation of a believer never comes from God” (159). Too bad Paul did not have *Grace Walk* before he told the Corinthian believers, “Expel the wicked man from among you” (1 Cor 5:13 NIV) and hand him “over to Satan” (v. 5).

Relativism also guides McVey’s thoughts on doctrine and Christian fellowship. Not surprisingly, he downplays doctrine: “To say that you are a Christian doesn’t simply refer to the particular set of doctrinal beliefs you hold. It doesn’t just refer to the way you live. It points to what you *are* at the deepest level of your being” (68). Even churches, according to McVey, should not be evaluated by their doctrine. He concludes: “If one insists on evaluating modern church life on the basis of right and wrong, then all Christian churches are right and all of them are wrong. In other words, no church or denomination is totally right or totally wrong” (161). Churches must not allow “superfluous dogma” to conceal the truth (161)! A grace perspective on church “doesn’t demand that we all agree on every detail of faith and practice” (161).

The problem, of course, is that McVey’s thoughts put the purity of the church’s doctrine and witness in jeopardy. According to his system, can orthodox believers have fellowship with Mormons? Jehovah’s Witnesses? What about with mainline Episcopalians when they uncritically approve of homosexual behavior and ordain unrepentant homosexuals to ministry? Should we overlook this as mere “superfluous dogma,” a mere disagreement on arcane details of “faith and practice”? Can we have fellowship with any church or denomination as long as they are willing to call themselves “Christians”?

Exegesis

The final area of contention I had with this book has to do with its lack of exegetical foundations. Again, in fairness, we recognize that *Grace Walk* is not a commentary, nor does it intend to present detailed exegesis of Scripture. Nevertheless, all Christian theology must be based on proper handling of the Bible. We are to rightly divide the word of truth (2 Tim 2:15).

This book is woefully lacking in this area. Let me point to one particularly glaring example found on pp. 57-58. McVey offers here an interpretation of Galatians 2:20 which begins, “I have been crucified with Christ.” In this interpretation he makes this confusing statement:

When Paul said that he had “been crucified with Christ,” he spoke of a past event. The Greek word translated “crucified” is in the present tense, indicating that it was a historical event which continues to have present implications (57-58).

The problem with this analysis is that the Greek word for “I have been crucified” is not in the present tense but is—as the English translation clearly indicates—in the perfect tense. Such sloppy handling of the Word of God leads one to doubt the credibility of the foundations on which the rest of McVey’s argument is built.

As I read this book I found Scripture passages repeatedly coming to mind that offer direct contradiction to McVey’s arguments. Let me cite one example. In his chapter on “The Vice of Values,” McVey makes a point of saying that Christians should not engage in “constant self-examination” (112). There rushed to my mind, however, Scriptures like Paul’s admonitions that before the Lord’s Supper a man should examine himself (1 Cor 11:28); that we should work out our faith with “fear and trembling” (Phil 2:12); and that we should watch our “life and doctrine closely” (1 Tim 4:16 NIV). In like manner, McVey’s round rejection of all disciplined obedience as legalism, brought the sharp contrast to mind of Paul’s encouragement to Timothy to “exercise yourself toward godliness” (1 Tim 4:7). The margins of my copy of McVey’s book are filled on nearly every page with contrasting scriptural cross-references that deny McVey’s assertions. In the end, I did not find that this book was true to the spirit and themes of sacred Scripture.

Conclusion

As this review has made clear, I found much in McVey’s *Grace Walk* to be spiritually dangerous. It offers a deformed view of soteriology and sanctification that does not do justice to the believer’s continuing battle with sin. It abandons the Bible’s clear call to discipline and godliness. It may well lead one to lawlessness. It reflects a relativistic perspective that sees no clear rights and wrongs. It is based on flimsy exegesis.

In many ways I think the *Grace Walk* approach reflects the baby boomer shaped values of its author (born 1954). It is in many ways theology for the self-indulgent, evangelical baby boomer, justifying his jettisoning of basic Christian disciplines, commitments, and expectations. He need not busy himself with such things as committed church attendance, membership, Scripture reading and memorization. He also need not judge others. By the way, the converse is also true: No one has the right to judge or evaluate him. McVey seems to believe that the major problem facing the church today is legalism. But when I survey the modern church landscape this hardly seems to be our problem. The basic problem we face is not low spiritual self-esteem. It is not that we are just way too hard on ourselves and demand too much from ourselves spiritually. It is not

that our churches are overly focused on right doctrine. Our problem is not legalism but hubris, libertinism, and rebellion against Biblical standards.

The major trouble with Steve McVey's *Grace Walk*, is a faulty understanding of grace. We do not understand the grace of God until we understand his wrath (a concept that is completely absent from the pages of *Grace Walk*). The non-judgmental, unconditional, man-centered "grace" that McVey describes is distant from the Biblical presentation of God's sovereign and free grace. It is closer to what Dietrich Bonhoeffer described as "cheap grace."

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