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## Living by the Word

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### Inclusive or Exclusive Grace?

Ephesians 2:4-10.  
John 3:14-21.

**I**N QUITE a different way, the passage from John declares the same great affirmation of Ephesians 2:8: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God." Though John's Gospel uses the term "grace" only in its prologue (1:16-17), the fundamental claim of this passage is that God has given eternal life to the faithful as sheer gift.

The affirmation that God gave his only Son is in part the affirmation that God sent the Son, that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. It is also the affirmation that God gave his Son for us on the cross. In this passage, at least, it is in the cross that God's love for the world is known as well as enacted. Raymond Brown in his Anchor Bible commentary points out that the form of the verb "to love" suggests that John 3:16 refers to a specific act of love. It is not just that God always loves the world and now gets around to showing it. Calvary is God making love, not simply demonstrating it.

In John's Gospel God's gift on the cross is in part the gift of sacrificial love. Jesus is the lamb of God, slain on the day the passover lamb is slain, to take away the sins of the world. In John 3:16 we hear the echoes of another (near) sacrifice. God speaks to Abraham in Genesis 22:2: "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love . . . and offer him . . . as a burnt offering." Surely John reads the release God provides Abraham as a foretelling of the release God provides all believers: "God himself will provide the lamb . . . my son."

God's gift on the cross is also the gift of victory—Christ's victory and the promise of victory for believers. John tells of Christ's mission in terms that are spatial, almost geographical. The Word descends from heaven, sent from God. When he completes his mission, Jesus will return to heaven, to God. That return will be victory: "It is accomplished!" he cries from the cross. On the cross Jesus is lifted up above the earth, toward heaven.

The victorious, triumphant, homeward journey has begun. John finds an Old Testament foreshadowing of this meaning for the cross as well: "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

For John the grace that saves us is the grace of the cross, and as with Ephesians we receive that gift through faith. John 3:16 could as well be translated: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who has faith in him may have eternal life." In this Gospel, faith is above all the faith which *decides* for Jesus. The Greek word for judgment is the same as the word for crisis. When Jesus comes into the world (when the light shines in the darkness), there is a crisis. People have to choose for the light or for the darkness. Faith chooses light.

While Ephesians also attends to God's grace as bestowed through the cross, the affirmation of this passage is primarily that God has graced us through Jesus' resurrection. Jesus' resurrection is not only an event in his life. It is also an event in ours. By Jesus' resurrection we are freed from sin and empowered to do the good works that God has intended for us from the start. We are not only freed from evil, we are freed for the good. In an astonishing image, we are freed from the constraints of this earthly life. The world is not our home for long; more than that, it is not our home any longer: God "raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:6). Our sons watch a TV program called "My Secret Identity." Ephesians says that our secret identity is as citizens of heaven—raised with Christ from our sins to good works.

If for John the faith that responds to grace is primarily decision, for Ephesians it is primarily gift. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing: it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast." For John, too, faith comes "from above," but the element of

judgment and choice almost outweighs the element of gift and surprise.

Both John and Ephesians testify that the gift we receive through grace is not only a promise for life beyond death but a promise for this life. For John "eternal life" is not only life beyond death, it is also life lived in the light of eternity: life that chooses Jesus, life that is born from above. For Ephesians the resurrection is not only a gift of the age to come. The age to come will affirm and expand the benefits we have already received. Resurrection is ours—our secret identity.

There is a difference in tone between the two great affirmations. For John the promise of grace through faith points toward exclusiveness—a great division. For Ephesians it points toward inclusiveness—a surprising invitation.

One of my teachers once mused that there is a distinction between the major premise and the minor premise of John 3:16. "God so loved the *world* that he gave his only Son, so that everyone *who believes* in him may not perish but have eternal life." In John's Gospel, God redeems the world by redeeming some from the world.

While both John and Ephesians affirm the election of God's chosen from the beginning and the reception of grace through faith, John's Gospel does seem to stress division, exclusion: "For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light" (3:20). This may result in part from the Johannine community's dispute with synagogue members over the claims of Jesus.

Ephesians seems to stress inclusion. The tone is one of amazement that outsiders have now been included in the promises of God. The dividing line is not so much between us and them as between the old us and the new us, our death and our life. This may result in part from the mix in the Ephesian church, where gentiles joined Jewish Christians as part of the resurrection community.

As Holy Week approaches, these passages provide us the opportunity to reaffirm the heart of our faith: "by grace we are saved, through faith." We may need to decide for our time and our communities whether that affirmation invites us to draw the line or to open the door.

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