

Institutional Grace— An Oxymoron?

The expressions “act naturally,” “found missing,” “plastic glasses,” and “giant shrimp” are known as oxymorons—expressions that in their superficial or literal meaning are self-contradictory or absurd. Does the term “institutional grace” also fit that definition?

The nature of grace is accepting and forgiving, while the nature of an institution is to establish by using rules, policies, and regulations.

Grace is a product of the unconditional love and acceptance of God. To give grace to others means to live toward them as God lives toward us—that is, being forgiving, loving, and accepting. Grace accepts you as you are, shortcomings and all, while an institution is more likely to accept you when you measure up.

The word *institution* comes from the root word “to stand” or to establish. The institution is organized by people

who “stand” for something and who wish to perpetuate their convictions. Therefore, they establish policies and standards. In order to ensure that their convictions persist into the future, they “institutionalize” their ideas. The result? Institutions develop church manuals, policy manuals, student handbooks, and education codes.

This brings us to the question, “Is it possible to communicate a loving, warm, accepting God in an institutional setting? Is ‘institutional grace’ an oxymoron?”

It’s the age-old challenge of balancing law and grace. When do you apply the law, and when do you extend grace? I heard a story about a woman who had a child out of wedlock, and the church extended grace by welcoming her into its fellowship. They gave her a shower and helped her extensively as she cared for her new baby. The result? She had another child out of wedlock. When are we enablers, and when are we truly extending grace?

Imagine Moses, the institutional leader, saying: “Lord, these children of yours have built a golden calf. I think that this is really a problem of environmental depravity caused by their poor home condi-

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By Gordon Bietz

tions in Egypt. Please don't hold them responsible for these actions."

Law and Grace in the Early Christian Church

The early church leaders sought to find that balance between the application of law and grace: "Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved'" (Acts 15:1, NIV).¹

They were saying that salvation required the performance of certain Jewish rites; it mandated certain rules. "You can't abandon the standards given to us by Abraham!" they exclaimed. They had a major disagreement about which rules and regulations were prerequisites for salvation.

"This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed. . . to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question" (Acts 15:2).

We live in an age of independent individualism that generally thumbs its nose at institutional rules. Its response to church and school is: "I don't care what you say. I am my own person, and you shouldn't presume to restrict my liberty."

We can learn something from Paul's response to this dispute in the early church. Why did Paul go to Jerusalem? It is because he cared about the community. The institution was important to him. What "the brethren" had to say mattered to Paul.

"When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses'" (Acts 15:4, 5).

If you translated this into a contemporary setting, it might read, "Then some of the believers who belonged to the conservative party stood up and said, 'We must not allow anyone who eats meat or wears jewelry to join the church.'"

The apostles and elders met to address this question. Considering the relationship between Jews and Gentiles at this time, this was probably a fierce discussion. The Jews had traditions that led them to consider the Gentiles as heathen. According to Jewish law, you didn't marry them, you didn't eat with them, and you didn't enter their houses. Now, all of these "heathen" were accepting Jesus and joining the church. I am sure that the Jews who had been following God all along said that the standards were falling. In defending their views, they quoted the Old Testament rules about circumcision.

Picture Removed

"After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: 'Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are'" (Acts 15:7-11).

Thus, in the early development of the institutional church, Peter applied grace. James summarizes the decision at that first General Conference session:

"When they finished, James spoke up: 'Brothers, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. . . . It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God'" (Acts 15:13-19).

The basis of the decision was not a string of quotations from the Old Testament. The Judaizers were doing that. The leaders didn't get out the policy book, the church manual, or

the student handbook. James expressed what seemed to be the consensus of the group after their discussion. And that consensus was expressed in six words: “We should not make it difficult!”

Human institutions tend toward making things difficult, toward being exclusive. We like to belong to a privileged group and to be chosen for the platinum credit card and the first-class upgrade on the airplane flight. The party of the Pharisees wanted to use their “club” to elevate their exclusivity.

Rules and Relationships

What does “Don’t make it difficult” mean in an institutional setting? I would suggest it means rational rules mediated by relationships. If institutional rules are understandable and explainable to a reasonable person, then they are not difficult! Notice I said “a reasonable person.” (I know that we don’t always deal with reasonable persons.) Adventist institutions are presented with a complex task. On the one hand, we must uplift the gospel, the story of salvation, freely given and not behavior dependent. On the other hand, we must accomplish this task in a social setting that requires a rather long list of behavioral standards.

Discipline is necessary for every institution, including schools. No group can achieve community unless it holds some things in common, unless it has discipline. But the

human inclination is to apply *punishment*, not *discipline*. Discipline is redemptive, whereas punishment is punitive. In a disciplined community, the members express responsibility for one another by making sure correction is applied redemptively.

Postmodernism defines reality and truth as personal preference rather than external standards. It says: “What you do is none of my business—until it begins to hurt me!” This selfishly focused individualism is destructive and tears down community.

Categories of Rules

I believe dividing rules into three categories can help us understand our task.

1. Some behavior standards are integral to our doctrinal beliefs. Rules relating to Sabbath activities and co-educational dorm rooms would fall under this category. They are an expression of fundamental church teachings, are supported by Scripture, and must be considered non-negotiable.

2. Some behavior standards grow out of our religious cultural heritage. Among other things, these include wearing jewelry and attending movie theaters. We refrain from or embrace these items because they form a part of our image—this is who we are. They are part of our conservative religious tradition. I believe it is within the right of the institution to apply those behavior standards in its own setting. However, when we explain these rules to students, we should make it clear to them that salvation does not depend on adherence to these



rules. The rules simply reflect our corporate culture and how we wish to represent ourselves. We don't exclude people from the church nor do we make judgments about them if they don't follow these rules, but in the small community of a school, we have decided to adopt certain policies. It is rather like requiring everyone to wear uniforms.

3. Some behavior policies are necessary rules of engagement for situations when adolescents and adults are living in close proximity. These include such things as where you are allowed to park your car, what time the cafeteria serves lunch, when the dorm closes, and whether you're allowed to eat in class or at the library.

In order to create rational regulations, we need to understand these categories of rules. It is important that we don't seek to place heavy moral implications on transgression of behavior standards that are simply institutional or cultural norms.

Of course, even when administrators feel they have a good rationale for a rule, students and parents may not agree. So in the end, it is the relationship that balances law and grace. The Old Testament provides us with a perfect illustration. The Shekinah glory or presence of God resided in the Mercy Seat above the tablets of the law. It was there that mercy and law joined. The presence of God brought them to-

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gether. In New Testament times, Jesus showed us through His life and teachings how to combine law and grace. He died to uphold the law but also to give us grace.

And so in the setting of Christian education, we have incarnational teachers, deans, and administrators who combine law and grace in their lives. They model living the rules and loving the students. The institution does not communicate grace either by throwing out the rules or making them innocuous. It communicates grace by having grace-filled people, those who have experienced the gospel in their own lives, mediate the rules of institutional life.

Melting and Molding

We first must melt students with our love before we can mold their opinions. Too often, we seek to mold their opinions before we melt them—and they rebel. Through loving relationships, we can unite grace and law. The chart below illustrates the grace-full school.

M. Scott Peck says: "The Church likes to refer to itself as the 'Body of Christ.' But it behaves as if it thought it could be the Body of Christ painlessly, as if it could be the Body without having to be stretched, almost torn apart, as if it could be the body of Christ without having to carry its own cross, with-

Issue	Non-Grace Orientation	Grace Orientation
School Atmosphere	Cold and suspicious	Friendly and accepting
Principal	Warden	Helper
Teachers	Police	Mentors
School	Confining	Liberating
Criticism	Given freely to all who "deserve it"	Shared privately with people involved
Employees	Treated with suspicion	Treated with trust
Dormitory	Prison	Home
Deans	Parole officers	Friends
Worship Talks	Pointing to problems	Pointing to solutions
Acceptance Policies	Open to the perfect	Open to the teachable
School Rules	Restrictions	Guidelines
Student Handbook	What you can't do	What you don't want to do
Rebellious Youth	Not welcome here	You can find help here
Questions	Don't ask	Freedom to question
Obedience	From fear	From love
Sin	Breaking the rules	Breaking the relationship
Second Coming	Fear	Joy
Faith	Leap in the dark	Leap into light
God	Judge to appease	Father to love
Law	Restrictive instructions	Loving guidelines

out having to hang up on that cross in the agony of conflict. In thinking that it could be thus painlessly the Church has made a lie out of the expression the 'Body of Christ.'"²

Being an institution that represents God's grace and law means being the body of Christ. It is an incarnational experience that requires, as Peck says, carrying the cross, which is often painful. To avoid pain, we go to one extreme or the other—legalistically applying every rule to every student or simply looking the other way while pretending that we are applying grace.

At the beginning of this article, we used Moses as an illustration of someone who would not ignore the sins of the Israelites when they worshiped a golden calf. He carried out some very severe punishment. But when God suggested to Moses: "I have seen these people, . . . and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may

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Moses mediated the law with such love that he was willing to relinquish his own salvation for the people he served. That kind of love will always communicate grace, even in an institution with many rules.

And, of course, Christ is our ultimate example. He took the ultimate step of identifying with humanity—He became one of us. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14).

So, is institutional grace an oxymoron? No, unless the people of the institution are not incarnational representatives of Jesus and His love. In the early church, we have a picture of what happens when Christians don't represent Christ.


"But the early Christians began to look for defects in one another. Dwelling upon mistakes, giving place to unkind criticism, they lost sight of the Saviour and of the

great love He had revealed for sinners. They became more strict in regard to outward ceremonies, more particular about the theory of the faith, more severe in their criticisms."³

When they lost sight of the love of Jesus, they became strict about outward ceremonies and more concerned about the theory of the faith than about the love of God. When Christ is incarnate in the lives of the administrators and teachers of the institution, we will truly have institutional grace.

Dr. Leonard Brand tells a story of one of his leprosy patients named Pedro. For 15 years, Pedro had lived without pain sensation in his left hand, yet somehow the hand had suffered no damage.

Pedro revealed that when he was born, he had a birthmark on his hand. The doctors verified that a tangle of arteries brought extra blood to that spot. As a result, the blood flowed swiftly through that part of his hand, keeping its temperature close to that of the heart, too warm for the leprosy to flourish.

So it is with our schools. When we keep our students close to our hearts in love, grace and law flourish together, and we can truly model "institutional grace." 



burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation" (Exodus 32:9, 10), Moses manifested the love of a true leader. He "went back to the Lord and said, 'Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written'" (Exodus 32:31).



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. All Bible texts in this article are quoted from the New International Version.
2. M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), p. 300.
3. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1948), vol. 8, p. 241.