

Is Joseph Prince's Radical Grace Teaching Biblical?

Since there has been a wave of articles against "hypergrace" preaching and churches in the past year, I decided to read a key book authored by Joseph Prince, who is considered by many to be the main progenitor of this genre of teaching.

I read Prince's book *Destined to Reign* last week with the idea that I would find out for myself what he really teaches. Half of the Christians I know who read this book loved it, and the other half thought it was heresy, so I was quite interested in the content because I've never seen mature Christians who know the Word of God be so divided on any author since the beginning of the Word of Faith teachings by Hagin and Copeland in the 1970s and '80s.

I must admit I started the book with a suspicious view because for the last 35 years, I have seen some of the catastrophic results of various types of "hypergrace" Christianity. To my surprise, I really enjoyed the book, and as a result I will make some adjustments in how I present the gospel.

This is not to say there were not some theological issues I was concerned with. Prince makes the same mistake thousands before him have made: They come up with some kind of theological system they are comfortable with (he is a "once saved always saved" classical dispensationalist) and then deductively read every passage of Scripture with their biased lens, resulting in forcing the Scriptures to fit their interpretation. Many people make the mistake of wanting to fit God into a concise theological box, resulting in blanket statements that are not always easily proven or true.

The greatest thing about *Destined to Reign* and Prince's theology is that it is Christ-exalting and Christ-centered. Prince's main passion is not grace but Jesus, which is the place the whole church needs to be but often is not. (Prince believes grace and the person of Christ are

synonymous.)

In spite of its flaws, I will actually recommend the book to certain Christians suffering from a performance trap in which they try to earn God's favor and love by the things they do instead of through the merit of Christ's finished work. There is enough good stuff in the book for new believers and those struggling with guilt to get them on a good foundation—if it is coupled with other books and teachings to bring it balance.

What is probably happening with Prince is what happens with many popular preachers who start trends. Other preachers read their stuff and take it to an extreme, teaching things the founder never intended. I do not get the impression Prince believes in cheap grace or that a person who really understands Prince's heart and teaching will dive into sin—but there are certain places where it is easy for the theologically untrained to take his teaching too far and preach a cheap grace or hypergrace message. Prince makes it clear he hates sin and also preaches from the Old Testament to exalt Christ.

The following are some of my concerns with the book. (Since this is not an academic treatise, I am not citing the exact page numbers of Prince's statements—you just have to read the whole book.)

1. Prince Makes Blanket Statements and Tries to Fit All Scripture Within His System

For example, he says it is not necessary to confess our sins and that Paul's epistles never give an example of a believer confessing sin. He says this because he believes all of our sins, both past and future, have already been forgiven (something I agree with in principle) and that we should just be honest with God and speak to Him about our failures. But Prince says this is not the same as confession of sin for forgiveness. I say this is a merely a cute play on words because speaking to God about our sins is going to lead to confession anyway.

The challenge I have with this teaching is that in 1 John 1:9, John teaches us to confess our sins. Although Prince acknowledges that this passage refutes his teaching on radical grace, he tries to get around it by saying this passage was written to the gnostics in the church—something he states without citing any commentaries, sources or historical evidence. I counter that the context of 1 John shows that John was writing to believers. He calls them his “dear children” in 1 John 2:1 (NIV). Also, remember that originally the book had no chapters or verses; thus, the “children” in 1 John 2:1 are connected to the first chapter of the book.

Although the apostle John was dealing with gnosticism in this epistle when he spoke about the humanity of Christ in 1 John 1:1 and 4:2-3 and the fact Jesus came in the flesh—a fact gnostics refute because they believe Jesus only came as a spirit because they believed the realm of the flesh was evil—the recipients of this letter were not gnostics but true believers who were being warned against gnosticism.

Furthermore, if 1 John 1:9 was written to unbelievers, why would John tell them to confess their sins? Its impossible for an unbeliever to recount and confess all the sins they ever committed. When I came to Christ, I did not confess each and every individual sin of my past 19 years. I just surrendered my heart to Christ and asked Him to forgive me for being a sinner. When a person comes to Christ, they are not commanded to confess their sins but to receive Jesus as Lord (Rom. 10:9-10; Acts 16:31). Only a Christian can remember and confess individual sins as they are committed.

Furthermore, James 5:16 also teaches believers to confess their sins. Lastly, Paul actually implies confession of sin in 2 Corinthians 7:9-11 when he encourages the Corinthian church to repent and have “godly sorrow.”

2. Prince Bases His Theology Only on the Writings of Paul

I find it interesting that Prince says he only preaches the

gospel Paul preaches. Although I admire Paul, Prince has to be careful with statements like this because he can give the impression that the other writings of the New Testament are not inspired or even canonical. (Even the gnostics only cited Paul and disregarded the other epistles as well as the Old Testament.)

Prince seems to quote the Gospels only occasionally, which gives me the impression he probably believes much of the teaching is not relevant to the church age because the Gospels were written before the Resurrection. This enables Prince (and typical hyperdispensationalists) to avoid dealing with the command for believers to take up their cross (Mark 8:34-36) and other such passages that demand high commitment.

I believe any teacher who is called to preach like Paul the apostle must preach the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27), which means they need to include equally the Gospels and the epistles of John, Jude, Peter and James as well as the book of Hebrews and the Old Testament.

3. Prince Doesn't Clearly Define the Role of the Moral Law of God

Prince teaches that the Old Testament Law is not necessary anymore for the church, and he makes a simple dichotomy between both covenants. He doesn't even make an allowance for the need for the moral law of God (the Ten Commandments), except to show us how sinful and lost we are.

The challenge with this simplified view of the Old Testament is that Paul the apostle told us to know the Old Testament so we will not set our heart on evil things and sin as the Jewish nation did (1 Cor. 10:6). Thus, the moral law was still necessary to keep the church in line, according to Paul.

Prince says there is no room for preaching the law of God in the church and that God only blesses the message of grace. However, church history does not back this up. Charles Finney was perhaps the greatest evangelist in American history, and he would regularly preach the moral law of God to get people

convicted and then use the gospel to get them saved and consecrated. He preached the law of God to both saint and sinner. You can also throw Jonathan Edwards into the mix as a powerful preacher who used the law of God in his messages.

Prince would probably say these men preached a mixture of law and grace. However, the fruit of their ministries shows that their work and message was greatly blessed of God and had historic results. I personally teach regularly on the law of God in the church with great effect and fruit. Prince would probably say I preach a mixture of law and grace—but if I stand in the company of Finney and Edwards, who used the moral law as a standard to convict sin, I will take Prince's criticism with a smile!

I believe the moral law is still needed, or else there would be no conviction of sin and our standard of righteousness would collapse down to the ethos of the surrounding culture. Furthermore, the moral law was repeated in the New Testament, even by Paul in Ephesians 4-6, when he told the church not to steal, not to be angry, not to covet, not to commit sexual immorality, not to be idolaters and to honor their fathers and mothers. Furthermore, all the New Testament writers repeatedly used the Ten Commandments as the standard of holiness for the church because it reflects the nature and character of God.

Even when Jesus gave His followers a new commandment to love one another (John 13:34), He was still using love as a law to obligate the church to a standard of living—something Paul repeated in Romans 13:8-10.

Prince thus lumps the moral law (the Ten Commandments) with the ceremonial law of God and says both have been done away with and are not relevant to the church. What he fails to realize is every time the law is dealt with by Paul (in Galatians, Romans, Hebrews and Colossians), the context is always circumcision, animal sacrifices and the observance of the Sabbath and holy days. Hence, Paul is primarily referring to the ceremonial aspects of the law, not the Ten Commandments.

Prince brings out the fact that Paul calls the Ten Commandments the “ministration of death” in 2 Corinthians 3:7 (KJV). However, I would counter that in spite of this, Paul and the other New Testament writers continually used the Ten Commandments as the standard of ethics for the church. The ministration of death has to do with the fact that without Christ, we are all guilty before God—a point we all agree with. Galatians 3:24 calls the law our schoolmaster that leads us to Christ; thus, it is a standard of holiness that brings conviction and leads us to depend on the grace of Christ to fulfill it. Romans 8:4 clearly teaches us the Holy Spirit empowers us to fulfill the righteous requirements of the law; thus, it’s standards are still a requirement for functional holiness. Furthermore, the strength of sin is the law (1 Cor. 15:56).

But the point of the New Testament is that Jesus gives us the power to live righteously through His Spirit. It is not just imputed righteousness from Christ with no obligation on our part. When we break the Ten Commandments, that is still a sin that we believers have to repent of and confess to the Lord for forgiveness.

I do agree with Prince that we need to be Christ-focused and Christ-conscious to have victory over sin and that we can only have faith and grace to walk in victory through the imputation of Christ’s righteousness—not our own merit. Where we depart ways is that I contend the Ten Commandments are still necessary as our standard for how Jesus wants us to live by His power and grace. The law doesn’t save us. It reminds us of our sinfulness and, as a schoolmaster, leads us to depend on Christ alone.

To summarize this point, I don’t agree with Prince when he says we don’t need the law to govern our behavior—we just need grace, he says—because, in my perspective, grace uses the standard of the moral law, as is repeated over and over in the New Testament.

4. Prince Believes in “Once Saved, Always Saved”

As a typical dispensationalist, Prince believes that once a person receives Jesus Christ as Savior, they can never lose their salvation. (Some know this as the doctrine of eternal security.) The challenge I have with this is that it fails to interpret individual passages honestly that disagree with this particular system.

For example, Hebrews 6:1-8 and 10:24-29 clearly teach that people, after receiving the saving knowledge of Christ, can fall away and lose their salvation. Second Peter 2:20-22 and James 5:19-20 are as clear as tar on snow that a believer can fall away and once again be called a sinner who has to be restored. There are numerous other passages I can cite but will not because of the time.

I am more comfortable with the Reformed understanding of salvation, which teaches people can experience the fruits of salvation while never being chosen from “the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4), in which case they will not remain in the body of Christ because they were never a part of it to begin with. (First John 2:19 seems to teach the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.) This is the only position I have found sufficient to effectively deal with the conundrum of Scripture that seems to teach both eternal security and that a believer can fall away. I take the position of the apostle Peter: I may think I am saved, but I have to endeavor to make my calling and election sure (2 Pet. 1:10).

5. Prince Teaches That God Can't Get Angry With or Punish Christians

Prince says God does not get angry with Christians. But what about the admonition in Ephesians 4 to not grieve the Holy Spirit? (In Ephesians 4:30, *grieve* means “to cause great sorrow and distress,” which is akin to causing anger). Even stronger is Paul’s warning in Ephesians 5:6 against living an immoral life that brings God’s wrath on the disobedient. The clear context here, for those who are disobedient, is that this is written to the church of Ephesus; thus, God can have wrath toward Christians.

What about the sin that leads to death referenced in 1 John 5:16? Whether this refers to physical or spiritual death has been debated for centuries; however, the main point is that a believer can commit a sin so severe it can result in death. (I believe it is referring to physical death, which correlates to 1 Corinthians 11:30 and 1 Corinthians 5:1-6, where Paul wanted to hand a man over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh because he slept with his father's wife.)

Finally, what does Prince do about Jesus' words to the seven churches in Asia Minor in Revelation 2-3? In these letters, Jesus not only punishes but also threatens to remove whole churches from their cities unless they repent (Rev. 2:5). In Revelation 2:16, Jesus tells the church of Pergamum to repent or else He will come and fight against some in their church. In Revelation 2:22-23, Jesus tells those who are under the influence of Jezebel that He will kill them unless they repent. Finally, Jesus tells the church of Laodicea that He is about to vomit them out of His mouth (Rev. 3:15-16), Strong words, indeed, that do not nicely fit into the theology of Joseph Prince.

6. Prince Says God Is Not Judging Any Nation Because of the Cross

Prince teaches that God did not judge Sodom until Lot was removed, thus making a case that God will not judge any nation that has a presence of believers in it. What Prince fails to realize is that the Old Testament is replete with illustrations in which God judged the nations of Israel and Judah by disinheriting them even though there was a remnant left who believed. (See, for example, Isaiah 6:13.)

Furthermore, in Matthew 11:20-24, Jesus speaks about corporate judgment coming upon cities and towns because they rejected Him. Obviously it is difficult to subjectively prove post-biblically if God has judged nations and empires after the cross, since God often uses the militaries of other nations, natural disasters and their own foolishness to lay low people

and nations. Furthermore, God judged the nation of the Jews and Jerusalem for rejecting Christ in A.D. 70, when the Roman armies sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the Jewish temple, as Jesus predicted would happen within one generation (Matt. 24:34; Luke 21:20) even though this was almost 40 years after His resurrection.

7. Prince Preaches an Individual Gospel That's Disconnected From the Cultural Commission of Genesis 1:28

Perhaps one of the biggest flaws in Prince's radical grace doctrine is that his dispensational belief doesn't allow him to connect the gospel to the cultural commission of Genesis 1:28. Believers who embrace the original cultural commission God gave humanity through Adam and Eve (and reconfirmed to Noah after the fall in Genesis 9:1-2) realize we need the moral and civic law to understand how to disciple a nation (Matt. 28:19). The Ten Commandments were not just individual commands for piety and holiness but were primarily given as a corporate structure to disciple the burgeoning nation of Israel (Ex. 20:1-2). First Timothy 1:8-11 alludes to the corporate reality of the law when it says the law wasn't given to righteous men but for the unrighteous. (There has been only one righteous man on the earth who didn't need the law to know how to be holy—Jesus!) The fact that Paul deals with slave-trading and kidnapping shows that he was also dealing with systemic sin and not just individual sin in this passage.

In Summary

Although I think Prince's book has a lot of great insights and was worth the read, I am concerned many will take his writings to an extreme and that his radical grace perspective could lead people to just seek Jesus without obedience to simple and obvious things like being committed to a local church, tithing and walking in love. (Even though Prince pushes church attendance and giving, in principle his theology can make it easy to dismiss these practices.) Prince also seems to be against the spiritual discipline of fasting. Although I understand his point in this matter, I still believe fasting

very important to practice, albeit not for salvation. Not connecting his teaching to the cultural commission in Genesis 1:28 also puts Princeton on a faulty foundation and can lead a person to disconnect the gospel from the kingdom of God, thus leading to self-focus and narcissism. (The kingdom message connects redeemed individuals to their corporate responsibility to serve their communities.)

In spite of all this, it may be a great book for some new believers—although I believe young children and new Christians need to be taught the Ten Commandments as a standard for ethics in the church and world—and especially for those who constantly walk around with guilt and condemnation. If radical grace is taught in the context of the message of the kingdom of God to give it balance, it can be a great teaching that lifts up Jesus and transforms individual lives who can transform nations.

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