

# Grace Works!

*(And Ways We Think It Doesn't)*

*“Diagnoses the tendency of even the most  
biblical churches to drift into legalism.”*

—JOEL R. BEEKE

**DOUGLAS BOND**



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—**Joel R. Beeke**, President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids

“Anyone familiar with Douglas Bond’s other works will know him as a great storyteller. This book is about the greatest story of all: the gospel. Issuing from the faith of a recipient of God’s

good news and the care of a shepherd, any wounds inflicted here will be those of a friend. Grace is not the enemy of works but the only proper source. It's amazing how many ways we can get that wrong—usually, as Doug argues, by incremental and often imperceptible changes. There is a lot of wisdom in this book, but none greater than the wisdom that Christ is and gives us in his gospel.”

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“Grace works! What a concept! So simple, yet so neglected in our churches today. Douglas Bond opens our eyes to the power, beauty, and necessity of grace alone from regeneration to glorification and sounds a clear warning trumpet against the ‘moralistic therapeutic deism’ that dominates pulpits today.”

—**Tito Lyro**, Pastor, The Bible Presbyterian Church of Olympia, Washington

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—**Marvin Olasky**, Editor-in-chief, WORLD News Group

“Douglas Bond has written here his most important book on the most important controversy in the world: the gospel. With his usual verbal dexterity and ease, Bond not only drives out the demons of our remaining Pelagianism but fills our hearts with the work of our Savior and Lord. Read this book and be changed, because Jesus changes everything.”

—**R. C. Sproul Jr.**, Chair of Philosophy and Theology, Reformation Bible College, Sanford, Florida

Grace  
Works!

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# Grace Works!

*(And Ways We Think It Doesn't)*

DOUGLAS BOND



P U B L I S H I N G

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*For all those honest enough to admit  
that they have sometimes thought  
grace might not actually work*



“The safest road to hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.”

—C. S. LEWIS

“Satan’s stratagem is that he does not attempt an avowed destruction of the whole gospel, but he taints its purity by introducing false and corrupt opinions.”

—JOHN CALVIN

“We must exercise the utmost caution lest we allow any counterfeit to be substituted for the pure doctrine of the gospel.”

—JOHN CALVIN



# Contents

Foreword	11
Acknowledgments	13
Introduction	15

## **Part 1: The Unanimous Testimony of Church History: It Will Happen to Us**

1. From Grace to Disgrace	21
2. It Won't Happen in My Church	29
3. Satan's War Strategy	35

## **Part 2: "Grace Won't Work without Works": And Other Ways We Distort the Gospel**

4. The Gospel at Thirty-Five Thousand Feet	45
5. Getting the Bad News Right	51
6. Getting Grace Right	57
7. Objections to Free Grace	67

## **Part 3: Why Keeping Grace and Works in Order Matters: More Ways We Allow Law to Creep into Gospel**

8. Trust <i>and</i> Obey?	79
9. Three Uses of the Law—Not Four	85
10. One Way of Salvation—Not Two	95
11. Getting the Cart before the Horse	103
12. The Order Really Matters	111
13. The Dungeon Flamed with Light	119

## CONTENTS

### **Part 4: Adding Contingencies to Justification: Ways We Erode the Gospel with Good Intentions**

- 14. Corrupting Sanctification 127
- 15. Mingling Works with Grace 133
- 16. Inseparability of Faith and Works 143
- 17. Holiness by Grace Alone 149

### **Part 5: How to Interpret the Bible: And Ways We Misinterpret It**

- 18. What the Bible Is All About 163
- 19. Same Text, Different Message 171
- 20. More Ways We Diminish Jesus 179
- 21. Comparing Scripture with Scripture 193
- 22. Preaching Opposite Poles 199

### **Part 6: How We Say One Thing but Believe Another: How Departing from Confessions of Faith Corrupts the Gospel**

- 23. Believing What We Confess 211
- 24. Beware the Fine Print 221
- 25. Teaching Our Children What We Confess 229
- 26. Confessing Our Unity 241

### **Part 7: Gospel Vigilance: Rediscovering the Gospel Every Generation**

- 27. Never Yawn at Good News 257
- 28. Gospel Succession 267
- 29. All Else Fails, but Grace Works 281

Appendix A: We Worship Christ 299

Appendix B: A Hymn If Grace Doesn't Work 301

# Foreword

I WAS RECENTLY READING a book by an influential American pastor who made the argument that people both inside and outside the church are seeking happiness; therefore, the task of the church is to give them happiness. Failure so to do will lead to irrelevance, collapse in church attendance, impotence in outreach, and a general inability to connect with the wider culture.

The argument sounds plausible on first reading. After all, surely nobody of sound mind seeks to be unhappy or to find unhappiness? Yet there are a number of serious flaws with the case for happiness. The first is that it roots the meaning of life in the narrow felt needs or immediate desires of the individual. Second, it assumes the church is here to meet those needs and desires. Both are dangerously erroneous assumptions.

The man who walks into the doctor's office wanting a painkiller for his headache might actually need to have a brain tumor removed, and the doctor who simply gave him an analgesic would be delinquent in his duty and be jeopardizing the health of the patient. Thus it is with human beings and the church. Of course human beings want to be happy, but happiness is not their most pressing need, nor is it one that can be directly addressed in the manner in which we might ourselves desire. Further, it is not the church's task to pander to human desires and ambitions on this front; rather it is for the church to make people face the reality of their condition, to offer a precise diagnosis, and to propose an appropriate and adequate cure. Too often "happiness" and its pursuit is a way of escaping reality, not facing up to it.

## FOREWORD

In this book, Douglas Bond points to the real need which human beings have: not a need for happiness but a need for grace. Fallen men and women are in and of themselves utterly inadequate to stand before God. Every thought, word, and deed places them under divine judgment. It might make us happy to ignore this fact or to pretend it is not really there, perhaps even to trick ourselves into believing we might live forever. But time's winged chariot moves swiftly, and there comes a point where this world will pass away, along with all its temporary distractions, pleasures, and placebos. At that point, only grace—the grace of God manifest in and constituted by the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ—will avail for anything at all. Ironically, therefore, only grace can bring true and lasting happiness.

Read this book and take its message to heart. It is an antidote to the superficial gospels of happiness and pleasure, which compete for your attention. Here are words of the truth that will last even beyond the—your—grave.

Carl R. Trueman  
Paul Woolley Professor of Church History  
Westminster Theological Seminary  
Glenside, Pennsylvania

# Acknowledgments

I AM DEEPLY INDEBTED TO so many for what I have attempted to communicate in this book; many of their names occur repeatedly in the footnotes. I'm ever grateful for P&R Publishing and the editorial staff for their patience with me and for publishing so many of my books, and I am especially grateful for the editorial skill and endurance of Amanda Martin on this book. Marvin Padgett gave me the initial jolt to begin work on this book some years ago. Greg Bailey helped significantly to shape the early organization of it. The intrepid Spear family, my faithful and sometimes brutal local editors, made important suggestions, including contributing the study guide questions at the end of each chapter. Clark Edwards assisted in topical research, unearthing some of the Puritan gems that are found in the book. Pastor Tito Lyro read the manuscript and made many helpful and detailed suggestions for its improvement. Always and ever, I owe my mother, Mary Jane Bond, a great debt for instilling a love of books and reading in my childhood, and for her encouragement and her loving critique of everything I write.



# Introduction

WHILE I WAS GIVING a lecture on church history and the various corruptions of the gospel that have crept in throughout the centuries, my cell phone started warbling in my pocket. I glanced at the caller. It was the Director of Editorial at P&R Publishing, one of the most likeable people I know. I stepped out and took the call.

In his enthusiastic Southern drawl he said, “You’ve just got to write a book about this.” I groaned. Other times when publishers had initiated book ideas, it had meant stormy times ahead for my imagination. After that dreaded phone call, I was like Gollum and Sméagol, arguing with myself, berating myself with reasons why writing this book was such a bad idea: “I write history and fiction. I’m a storyteller, not a theologian. If this book needs writing so much, leave it to the experts.”

Next, I reminded myself of how C. S. Lewis had his demon Screwtape dry up his patient’s spiritual life by getting him to write a book about it.<sup>1</sup> Just when I’d convinced myself to get no closer to this book than I would to nuclear waste, counterarguments would shout in my ear. “It’s the gospel that’s at stake,” said one. I’d always wanted to believe that departures from the gospel only happened to others. Then, while reading John Newton, author of the hymn “Amazing Grace,” I heard him lament that in his day “errors abound on all sides, and every truth of the gospel is either directly denied or grossly misrepresented.”<sup>2</sup>

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan, 1982), 60.

2. John Newton, *Selected Letters of John Newton* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2011), 115.

## INTRODUCTION

This made me uneasy. What Christian has not heard preaching that sounds more like misrepresentation than proclamation of the pure doctrine of the gospel? Who among us has not heard a sermon that felt like it was leading us into By-Path Meadow, the stony pitfalls leading us to Doubting Castle and Giant Despair?

Newton's words made me uneasy because I too had heard these things. I'd heard sermons that sounded less and less like justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. I read on. Newton proceeded to extol how laudable it was "to contend for the faith once delivered to the saints; we are commanded to contend earnestly for it, and to convince gainsayers."<sup>3</sup>

In fear and trepidation, I succumbed. Though I hate controversy, here it is; I've written a book birthed in the very dust and grit of it. In doing so, however, I want to hear, and I want my readers to hear, what Newton wrote in a letter to a friend zealously setting out to contend for the free grace of the gospel. "Few writers of controversy," Newton cautioned, "have not been manifestly hurt by it. Controversies are productive of little good. They provoke those whom they should convince, and puff up those whom they should edify."<sup>4</sup>

Which makes me again want to abandon the project altogether, dump the manuscript over the rail, return to my genre, maybe take up basket weaving. I'm keenly aware of how dangerous writing this book is, and I so desire to flee that danger.

It's dangerous because it can so easily make me critical and superior, proud and self-righteous, pedantic and smug; it sets me up to "flatter [my] own superior judgments,"<sup>5</sup> as Newton put it. And it so easily puts me in the mode of tut-tutting at the

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

## INTRODUCTION

speck in my neighbor's eye while ignoring the 2x12, obvious to everyone else on the planet, protruding from my own eye. Knowing this, entering the fray feels like being fitted for new neckwear: a millstone.

On deeper reflection, though this book was *birthed* in controversy, it really isn't intended to be about it. It is far more a book about rediscovering the loveliness of Christ. Hence, I hope that readers who get to its last page won't think it's about controversy at all. My hope is that you will close the book bedazzled with the Savior, slack-jawed in wonder at a gospel of grace that works, that accomplishes all that our gracious Redeemer said it would.

To get there, however, I will explore the various ways we doubt that grace actually works, the various ways the Enemy distorts and corrupts the free grace of the gospel, and the various ways we become willing participants in his relentless scheme to redefine the gospel.

This is also a book about an overarching message of church history. Just as there is an impulse in every generation to corrupt the gospel, there is equally an overwhelming historical consensus about what the gospel of grace actually is. Hence, it is a call for generational vigilance to guard the pure doctrine of the gospel against Satan's strategy to insinuate false and corrupting opinions about the gospel, to the ruin of the church and her children.

Moreover, this book about grace is also a book about peace and unity—gospel unity. In that spirit, I'm forced to expose the various rivals to grace that have crept into the church in her past and to unmask corruptions threatening to destroy the gospel in every generation. And here's where the danger creeps in. I'm compelled to give examples of gospel deviations sounding from pulpits today.<sup>6</sup> This book is emphatically not, however,

6. In writing this book I have found it necessary to illustrate my concerns by quoting from sermons and other statements given by ministers in Bible-believing,

## INTRODUCTION

an exposé on individuals or churches. That would entirely defeat my purpose. My purpose is to help Christians realize that gospel corruptions don't just happen in other churches, to other ministers, to other institutions, to other families, to other people's children. Without constant vigilance to protect the pure doctrine of the gospel, as church history relentlessly demonstrates, it will happen to us.

Lastly, though most of my heroes are theologians and preachers, I'm neither; I'm a storyteller and willingly leave the theological intricacies to the experts. In the interest of equipping the saints, this book ranges widely in the fertile soil of my heroes, the best theologians dead and alive, men who unmask counterfeits and placard the Savior.

The conclusions I draw will not be tidy formulas, or simplistic how-to strategies, or lists of more rules about the rules. None of that works. The conclusion is grace, because only grace works. Only the Prince of Peace breaks down dividing walls and unifies his church around grace itself, grace that's not a thing but a person, Jesus Christ.

As I put pen to paper, "set for the defense of the gospel," as Newton wrote, it's my desire to be clothed with the "meekness, humility, and love" of Jesus, the qualities that "correspond with the precepts of the gospel."<sup>7</sup>

Read on, and hold me to it.

---

reformational, and theologically aware churches and denominations. I have made every effort to faithfully represent their wording and context, and I have reproduced unwritten conversations to the best of my memory and ability, and with as much accuracy as possible.

These quotations are used for one reason only: to demonstrate how distortions of the gospel may creep into the thinking of any individual or into the message in any church. But since most of us are sure it won't happen in our church or denomination, I decided it would be best not to give specific citations for these illustrations so readers won't dismiss these as some other church or minister's problem. We *all* are inclined to corrupt the gospel.

7. Newton, *Selected Letters.*, 112–13.

# PART 1

The Unanimous Testimony  
of Church History:  
*It Will Happen to Us*



# 1

## From Grace to Disgrace

FLYING HOME FROM UGANDA after two busy weeks of teaching, I was eager for an overnight layover in Amsterdam. Africa is a fascinating continent, but I was weary and hungry—and looking forward to Dutch cleanliness and orderliness. As we made our approach to the runway, I admired the beautifully ordered farms and the tidy layout of the city laced with narrow waterways. In my frame of mind, those canals seemed to sparkle in the sunlight like streets paved with gold.

While teaching in a remote area without running water or electricity, I had spent several nights in a Ugandan mud hut; it would be good to get back to civilization. It was a sunny Saturday afternoon, and my colleague and I were eager to find a good meal and explore Amsterdam. After all, it was a city that since 1578 had been a bastion of the Reformation, a city once filled with thousands who had been set free from the bondage of their sins by the regenerating power of the Spirit of God.

Once in the city, it was impossible not to be charmed by the warm evening, the old-world stone houses with Dutch gables, the tantalizing smells of flowers and pastries that hung in the air, and all about us the tall, fair-haired, smiling, affluent people strolling the narrow cobbled streets or dining and drinking together on their canal boats.

And then I halted. A medieval church loomed above the street, and though it appeared now to have been converted

into a boutique shop, its gothic arches, stained glass windows, and hand-chiseled stonework arrested my attention. I had to get a photograph. But there was a problem. The street was so narrow that even with a wide-angle perspective, I couldn't capture it. So I backed up, pressing myself tightly against a shop window. That was better. But just as I depressed the shutter on my camera, I heard and felt someone tapping gently on the window I was leaning against. I turned.

Most of us have heard about the notorious red-light district in Amsterdam. I came to the conclusion on that visit that there is not a clearly contained district—stay out of it and you'll be fine; it seemed to extend its brazen tentacles throughout much of the central city.

On the other side of the window I was leaning against, only inches away, posed an alluring young woman, smiling and offering her body to me. What flashed into my mind were the Scripture's warnings against the prostitute: "Do not desire her beauty in your heart" (Prov. 6:25). She could not have been a day older than my eldest daughter, early twenties at the most, and my heart almost broke. This poor, deceived, entrapped woman was some father's daughter. How had she come to this?

Which set me on a course of thinking: How had Amsterdam come to this? How had a country like the Netherlands, brought by the Spirit of God so overwhelmingly under the influence of the gospel of free grace 450 years ago, how had it come to this? There were no doubt prostitutes in Reformation Amsterdam, but in the gospel-saturated world that it then was, prostitution was clearly seen, known, and censured as a vice. Not so today.

It's not only legalized sex-for-hire peddled by live manikins in street-level windows; Amsterdam is known for its sweeping embrace of legalized hallucinogenic drugs, sex slavery and child pornography, gun running, same-sex marriage, abortion on demand, and state-sponsored euthanasia. How had it come to this?

## Calvin's Geneva

After college I worked on a Swiss dairy farm—a sturdy, rustic place—farmed for generations by a Christian family with roots in Calvin's Reformation in nearby Geneva. On August 1, after milking the cows, we cleaned up and drove the twenty minutes to Geneva to celebrate Swiss Independence Day.

I had studied Reformation history in college and had devoured works of John Calvin in those years. Under Calvin's preaching and pastoral ministry, Geneva had become the spiritual and theological capital of the Reformation. Refugees from all over Europe flooded to the city to hear Calvin preach. "Man's only righteousness," he declared from the high pulpit in Saint-Pierre, "is through the mercy of God in Christ, which being offered by the Gospel is apprehended by faith."<sup>1</sup>

Walking the promenade along the lake with thousands of revelers that evening, I found it hard to imagine Calvin proclaiming the imputed righteousness of Christ in Geneva. The "tearing wolves" of the city had returned. Drunkenness, indecency, and debauchery were as commonplace as cowbells, alpenhorns, and fondue. Enter the church where Calvin preached, and today one hears clerics still claiming to be reformational Christians but declaring a message mangled by centuries of ministers fudging and tweaking with the central doctrines of the gospel preached by Calvin long ago. It's tragic. But it's not just the Netherlands and Switzerland.

## Knox's Scotland

After several years as a refugee in Europe, John Knox returned to Scotland and declared Geneva "the most perfect

1. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. and ed. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), xxix–xxx.

## THE UNANIMOUS TESTIMONY OF CHURCH HISTORY

school of Christ since the days of the apostles.”<sup>2</sup> I wonder what he would call it today. Knox returned to Scotland in 1559, there to lead one of the most wide-encompassing revivals the Western world has known. There may have been more true Christians per capita in sixteenth-century Scotland than in any country at any time in history.

When John Knox stepped into the pulpit in 1560 and proclaimed the gospel of grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, thousands repented and turned to Jesus Christ. Knox, so fearful of mishandling the gospel in the pulpit, said of his preaching, “I quake, I fear, and tremble.”<sup>3</sup> He declared that in his calling, “I sought neither preeminence, glory, nor riches; my honor was that Christ Jesus should reign.”<sup>4</sup> And so King Jesus was proclaimed throughout Scotland during his lifetime and in the years immediately after his death, and the Church of Scotland grew and flourished.

Visit Scotland today, however, and you will be deeply perplexed. Not long ago I had the privilege of sitting down for lunch (it may have been haggis, nips, and tatties) in St. Andrew’s with David Robertson, pastor of St. Peter’s, Dundee, where Robert Murray McCheyne preached Christ in the nineteenth century. Not only was the Spirit of God poured out in a great revival there, but also as a result Scotland sent missionaries around the globe to proclaim the gospel to unreached peoples in China, Africa, India, and the Pacific Islands. “Today, Scotland leads Europe in drug and alcohol abuse,” David told me, “and Dundee has the highest rate of substance abuse in Scotland.”<sup>5</sup> He went

2. John Knox, cited in D. G. Hart, “The Reformer of Faith and Life,” in Burk Parsons, ed., *John Calvin: A Heart for Devotion, Doctrine, and Doxology* (Lake Mary, Florida: Reformation Trust, 2008), 50.

3. John Knox, cited in Iain Murray, *John Knox: The Annual Lecture of the Evangelical Library for 1972* (London: Evangelical Library; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1973), 22.

4. Ibid.

5. David Robertson, conversation with author, Doll House Cafe, St. Andrew’s, Scotland, April 2008.

on to describe the moral free fall of the country, the devastating effect on the family, the escalating rate of suicide, and in general the dismal condition of Scottish society and the church.

From the glorious revival beginning in 1560 when churches all over Scotland were filled with grateful worshipers, eager to hear the gospel of grace, church attendance in Scotland has been in steady decline for decades. Fewer than eight people out of a hundred attend church with any regularity, and the decline in attendance continues to plummet.

In 1996 I sat in the parlor of the venerable William Still in Aberdeen, Scotland, listening in wonder as he gave glory to God for the gospel blessings on his flock there and on dozens of missionaries—loved, prayed for, and supported by his congregation—proclaiming Christ throughout the world. Pastor Still's widely influential gospel ministry with little doubt was the high watermark of Scottish Christianity in the twentieth century. What remains in the Church of Scotland today, however, is a small huddle of men faithful to the gospel, clinging for life to a sinking ship. In its last gasps, the church for which Knox laid the foundation, the Church of Scotland, voted to install an openly homosexual minister, one who had divorced his wife, abandoned his children, and was living openly in a homosexual relationship.

It gets worse. There are a handful of faithful ministers in the Church of Scotland, but when one of them, David Randall, minister at Loudoun Parish in Newmilns, courageously stated that for its decades of defection from the authority of Scripture the Church of Scotland is apostate and is blaspheming the Holy Spirit, he was the one called up on charges of apostasy.

Apparently a Church of Scotland minister can break his marriage vow to his wife, leave her to care for the children, take up with a male lover, and yet step into the pulpit of his church and be a minister in good standing. But when my friend

Pastor Randall speaks out against it, he is the one brought up on charges. One wonders if there could be a more glaring illustration of ecclesiastical irony. But it's not just the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Scotland.

## Edwards's New England

When John Winthrop preached his sermon "A Model of Christian Charity" on the decks of the *Arabella*, flagship of the Massachusetts Bay Company fleet in 1630, and declared the Puritan community a "Wilderness Zion" and a "city on a hill," he could not have in his wildest dreams envisioned what New England has become today.

The decline began earlier than most of us want to admit. With the Half-Way Covenant in 1662, people who had no credible profession of faith in Christ were invited to the Lord's Supper. In short order Christ was reduced to a great moral example to follow, but was rejected as the Divine Son of God, the only Lord and Savior of sinners. The result was an erosion of the gospel that devolved into the rationalism and hostile unbelief endemic in the next centuries.

Today New England is the most irreligious, unbelieving region in the United States, with fewer people attending church—any church—than anywhere else in the country.

The compelling question is: how did it come to this?

## For Discussion

1. Read Galatians 3:1–3 and 5:7. Discuss the verbs Paul uses and what they reveal about the problem he sees in the Galatian church.

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? . . . Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by

the flesh? . . . You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?

2. Read Heidelberg Catechism 60 and discuss what it declares about how we are made righteous before God.

Q. How are thou righteous before God?

A. Only by a true faith in Jesus Christ; so that, though my conscience accuse me, that I have grossly transgressed all the commandments of God, and kept none of them, and am still inclined toward all evil; notwithstanding, God, without any merit of mine, but only of mere grace, grants and imputes to me, the perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ; even so, as if I never had had, nor committed any sin; yea, as if I had fully accomplished all that obedience which Christ has accomplished for me; inasmuch as I embrace such benefit with a believing heart.<sup>6</sup>

3. What other cities have had great times of revival and gospel proclamation but are now almost devoid of gospel witness? What were features of those revivals, and what led to the unbelief that marks those places today?

Pray earnestly for your pastor and elders that they would be faithful to the all-sufficiency of Christ and the gospel of free grace.

6. The confessions and catechisms quoted in this book can be found in *Historic Creeds and Confessions*, edited by Rick Brannan (*Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/brannan/hstercon.txt>) or at Ligonier Ministries (<http://www.ligonier.org/learn/topics/creeds-and-confessions/>).

INCLUDES STUDY QUESTIONS

**W**hen the church downplays the gospel, it breeds its own assassins: moralists who yawn at the notion of free grace in Christ alone and rebels who can't get out of pharisaical churches fast enough. Sounding the alarm, Douglas Bond celebrates the amazing, effective power of grace while showing us how to identify destructive "law-creep" in our churches and lives.

"Douglas Bond's most important book on the most important controversy in the world: the gospel. With his usual verbal dexterity and ease, Bond not only drives out the demons of our remaining Pelagianism but fills our hearts with the work of our Savior and Lord."

**R. C. Sproul Jr.**, *Associate Professor of Philosophy and Apologetics, Reformation Bible College*

"*Grace Works!* clearly shows how an emphasis on grace differentiates Christianity from all the works religions invented by man. Bond also explains well what happens when we decide the cake God gives us needs our own frosting: we get a sugar rush now and a stomachache later."

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