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When Grace Is No Longer Amazing The Tragic Life and Legacy of Brennan Manning

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The Apostle Paul instructed his convert and helper, Titus: "They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work" (Titus 1:16).

Brennan Manning was born in Brooklyn, N.Y., on April 24, 1934. He was baptized into the Roman Catholic Church as Richard Francis Xavier Manning. He says he was a disappointment to his mother, who wanted a girl. He continued in his adult life to hold onto and be driven by that unhealthy impression. Manning was ordained a Franciscan priest in 1963. He emerged as a very prolific writer, but to many he was an enigma. He has lived a long and tortured life, the agony of which was brought on mainly by no one but himself.

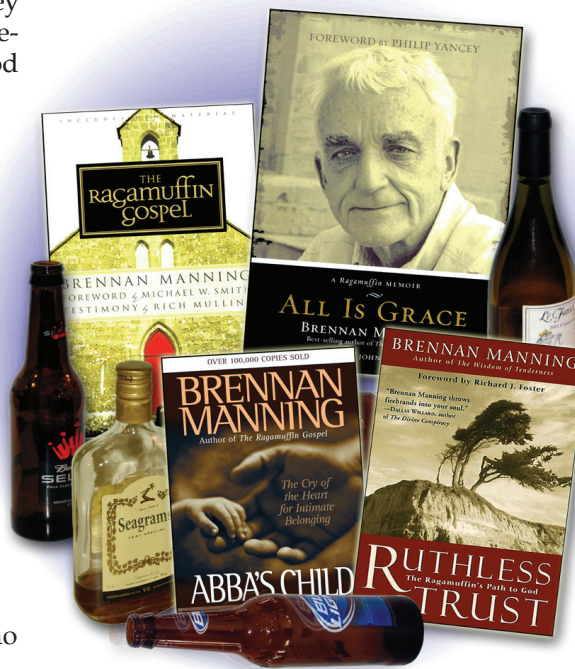
Manning's writings are popular because he writes well and can turn a phrase, but over the years many have criticized his aberrant views.¹ But not all within the evangelical camp express caution about Manning. For example, popular author and speaker

Beth Moore tells her followers that Manning "minister[s] to us out of his wealth of experience" and that "What God has used Manning to bring to the mixed bag of our generation of believers may be a gift without parallel."²

Manning often seems indifferent about gross sins and too often comes across as a lone ranger. He may have written well, but he has lived horribly and sinfully with no apparent concern for his shameful conduct.

He is now a defunct Roman Catholic priest who also had a broken marriage which ended in divorce. As an ex-priest he has a love/hate relationship with the Catholic Church. It can be added to all that a lifetime of admitted alcohol addiction, wildly skewed beliefs, and his distorted understanding of

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grace. His view of unconditional acceptance by God of just about anything he says or does moves him in extreme antinomianism (literally, lawlessness) and an unbiblical view of the Christian life.

Sanctification without improvement is far from the teaching of Scripture. Many would question any view of grace which leaves sinners unchanged or constantly defeated. True biblical sanctification results in growth in godliness. Occasional failure — sinning — and recovery is one thing, but living in or wallowing in sin is another. Grace accompanied by the Holy Spirit saves, empowers, and improves us. It never leaves us the same. God makes all grace abound to us to the end that we may be sufficient “for every good work” (2 Corinthians 9:8). We are after all, “*saved unto good works*” (Ephesians 2:10).

MANNING NOT MANNING UP

Manning has not always been truthful to his wider audience. In 2005, he boasted in a *Christianity Today* magazine interview that he had helped numerous people in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Just four days later, the online publication added an “Editor’s Note” to the interview, reporting that Manning had helped no one and that he called and left a voice message with the magazine saying, “The essential truth: I lied.”³ Perhaps the thought that his deceit would be discovered caused him to be truthful about his lies.

Following the Katrina lie, one can ask what else he has said and written that may also be a lie. As a “Christian” author he should take seriously Colossians 3:9. In that verse, believers are commanded to “not lie to one another.” The Apostle Paul urged believers to move away from any kind of sinful living, things like those which he detailed in chapter 2 of 2 Timothy: “Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter [sins], he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master,

prepared for every good work” (v. 21, insertion and emphasis added).

Manning has written more than 20 books. Among them are *Ruthless Trust*, *Abba’s Child*, and *Rabbi’s Heartbeat*. He clearly sets himself up as a religious expert and mentor, but from an evangelical perspective, he is far from it. The most widely known and best-selling of his books is titled, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*. It has been called a spiritual classic. Rich Mullen named his band based on that title. One critical review of *The Ragamuffin Gospel* offers the following:

“*The Ragamuffin Gospel* promotes the heresy of license. In his epistle to the Romans, Paul asks, ‘Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase? May it never be’ (Rom. 6:1-2), is his answer. But, Brennan Manning’s view of the gospel is devoid of the teaching of sanctification, whereby a believer is conformed into the image of Christ, turning from sin to serve the Savior. Manning excuses sin as human weakness that his gospel of love will cover regardless of whether the sinner is repentant or not. He attempts to demonstrate from the Bible that Jesus was not concerned about sin. Referring to the woman caught in adultery on page 173, he writes, ‘He [Jesus] didn’t seem too concerned that she might dash back into the arms of her lover.’ Yet we know from scripture that Jesus told her to go and sin no more. ... Manning’s inspiration for *Ragamuffin* is clearly seen by the experts he cites. These include humanist philosophers, heretics and mystics. Without apology or disclaimers, he quotes such noted new age leaders as Joseph Campbell, inner healers such as Francis MacNutt, heretical mystics like Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, humanist occultists like Carl Jung and false teachers like Morton Kelsey. He also appeals to Zen philosophy and other humanistic writings. These he attempts to harmonize with the Bible, but they just don’t mesh. His teach-

ing on meditation cannot be distinguished from the Eastern/New Age style of mind emptying. He instructs the readers to repeat an eight-word mantra for ten minutes while visualizing one’s idea of what Jesus might have looked like — something that cannot be done accurately. ... Elsewhere he uses a lot of vulgarity to get his point across.”⁴

THE CURTAIN PULLED ASIDE

An inside overview of Manning’s life can be seen for the first time with last year’s release of his autobiography and memoirs, entitled, *All Is Grace, A Ragamuffin Memoir*⁵ by Christian publisher David C. Cook. The book is endorsed by Philip Yancey, Michael Card, Larry Crabb, Max Lucado, Karen Zacharias, and several other notable Christians. One might ask if all those iconic endorsements, along with the book’s foreword by Yancey, make Manning a trustworthy luminary — or at least acceptable. His publisher may wish that is the case. However, Jesus said, “For by *your* words you will be justified, and by *your* words you will be condemned” (Matthew 12:37, emphasis added). In the end, Manning’s own words will either justify or condemn his life and teaching when held up to Scripture. High praises and endorsements for the one who has been called the “Wizard of Spirituality” are not the final arbiter. Glowing endorsements do not make truth. Manning readily admits and gives fair warning that he constantly obfuscates and is not truthful. For example, he acknowledges:

“Although I have always given the appearance of speaking openly about my alcoholism, rest assured it has always been only what I wanted the listener or reader to know, nothing more.”⁶

That statement tells more about Manning than he realizes. It also puts his honesty in question once again.

As Manning parades a lifetime of lies, pretensions, and prolonged continued lapses into drunkenness, one has to wonder if it is some kind of bid for pity or some weird cathartic exer-

cise because of his constant failure and hypocrisy. This is not just anyone with a drinking problem. This is supposed to be a spiritual leader, a revered author, and a man who wants to preach to all of us about grace.

THE KEY TO MANNING'S CONFUSION

Many normally astute people — including those who endorse his books — do not really understand where Manning is coming from; neither do they understand the basic flaw in his thinking. As noted above, Manning's book, *All Is Grace*, has a foreword by Philip Yancey. Following the foreword there is a section of readers' testimonies. It is here that speaker and author Sharon Hersh divulges:

"Initially I was confused, wondering how Brennan could preach a powerful message of grace but live a powerless life of chronic alcoholism. The stories, at first, made me mad — mad at Brennan for being the winsome ragamuffin who relentlessly preached that '*God loves us unconditionally, as we are and not as we should be*' while living as the reeking-of-vomit drunken ragamuffin who was definitely not as he should be."⁷

Hersh just does not get it. It is because of Manning's unbiblical view that grace is simply tolerance of sin, nothing more. Manning's teaching is that God tolerates anything he says or does because God likes him.

Here then at the very beginning of *All Is Grace* is an important statement that lays the groundwork for understanding Manning and his erroneous view of the Christian life. The foundation of Manning's understanding is that in grace God accepts us as we are and then leaves us as we are. Grace is there to accept us, but seems to have nothing to do with what we "should be." It is crucial that we see this and understand it, as it answers all the so-called paradoxes, contradictions, and confusion that readers see in Manning. His idea of grace means an unconditional acceptance that creates

no substantial change or deliverance of any kind — or at least very little. Teaching that grace is just all acceptance and tolerance with no grace-empowered and Spirit-empowered responsibility is a perversion of the Christian life. It should be emphasized that it is the same error addressed by the Apostle Paul in Romans 6:1-2:

"What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?"

For God's grace to be available at all Jesus had to suffer, bear the wrath of sin, and pay for the enmity with His own life. This in turn satisfied the holiness and justice of God. Manning's view appears to be that grace is then given to all whether they realize it or not or even want it. This is why his life changed so little. He has missed the element that links us to grace and that element is faith:

"... grace must be acknowledged for what it is and accepted with humble and joyful gratitude. This human decision, involving acknowledgment and acceptance, is the faith which corresponds to God's grace."⁸

We cannot separate grace from its effects once it is received:

"It is the reasonable demand for a life corresponding to the transformation which God hath already wrought in the believer through His saving grace."⁹

When we personally embrace Christ by faith, God's grace then becomes operative in our lives. Scripture is clear in Ephesians 2:10 that the same grace that saves, then empowers and enables change and good works which are ordained by God. Theologian Charles Ryrie comments that "Works cannot save (Eph. 2:9), but good works always accompany salvation (v. 10; Jas. 2:17)."¹⁰ God loves us too much to leave us as a "reeking-of-vomit drunken ragamuffin." We are called to walk in light, not wallow in vomit.

God calls us and enables us to say "no" to sin and "yes" to our calling in Christ. A redemption that does not clean us up should be questioned. While the Scriptures do not promise perfection, they do promise reform. It's called progressive biblical sanctification. A life marked by defeat, abuse, betrayal, and addiction is not, in any biblical sense, to be gloried in and seen as a grace-filled life. It is foolish to think so. It would mean redemption redeems nothing. If someone is living continually in gross sin it reveals, according to the Scripture, an absence of grace (Galatians 5:19-21; 6:7-8). The Apostle John warns that "if we say we have fellowship with Him and walk in darkness we lie and do not practice the truth" (1 John 1:6).

Scripture records many instances of God giving a new name to people who followed Him. The change anticipated what they should be and God enables them by grace and His own presence to be all that they should be. To miss this is to miss a vital part of what redemption and deliverance is all about. We never read that the prodigal son went on preaching tours between stays in the pig pen, still reeking of pig refuse as he traveled. Neither do we read that after returning to his father he kept going back to the far country and jumping back into the pig pen. He may not have been a perfect son, but by all indications he stayed in the right place and far away from his past. His father's love, mercy, and grace constrained him. Applying Manning's life discipline to the prodigal son would have the father constantly going to the pig pen to assure the son that it was no big deal if he stayed there and that everything was fine, but offering him no way of escape and change.

GRACE OR SOMETHING ELSE?

Manning has never really demonstrated a life of grace, but rather a life *without* grace. His words confirm that fact as he describes himself:

"This book is by the one who thought he'd be farther along by now, but he's not. It is by the inmate who promised the parole board he'd be good, but he

wasn't. It is by the dim-eyed who showed the path to others but kept losing his way. It is by the wet-brained who believed if a little wine is good for the stomach, then a lot is great. It is by the liar, tramp, and thief; otherwise known as the priest, speaker, and author. ... all is grace."¹¹

Manning prefers wallowing to winning and then pretending that grace is his justification for shoddy and sinful living. He is not talking of an occasional lapse, repentance, and recovery, but rather a lifetime of constant drunkenness and failure.

Manning's life is a self-created tragedy. He speaks of his "bedraggled, beat-up, and burnt-out life. ... a crooked path filled with thorns and crows and vodka. ... Amazed crowds one night and lied to friends the next. Drunk for years, sober for a season, then drunk again."¹² He then speaks of his being battered by God's "tender fury."¹³ Here he seems to blame God somewhat for his misery, but in fact his own sin and constant waywardness created the consequences he continually brought on himself. Glaringly absent from Manning's book is a conversion story. There is no time when he repents, receives Christ, and finds deliverance to become a new creature in Christ. For all the God talk and grace talk there does not seem to be a born-again experience.

James tells us that when we truly humble ourselves before God He will give us grace and "lift us up" (James 4:10). In James 4:7-10 there are ten commands which call for decisive action on our part in breaking away from the old way of life. Ryrie informs:

"There are 10 verbs, all commands, in these verses, in a tense which indicates the need for a decisive and urgent break with the old life."¹⁴

God's commands are God's enablement. He will not tell us to do anything He will not equip us to do. Manning's litany, on the other hand, seems to be: *I'm a drunk, I plan to stay*

that way, grace covers it and everything is fine. In fact, Manning says that he is a "poster child" for grace.¹⁵ More honestly, he could be a "poster child" for the liquor industry. Many would say he has lived a lifetime of selfish denial and "grace" is the perfect cover — at least in his mind. Denial is simply lying to oneself about one's true condition.

NOT FORGETTING WHAT LIES BEHIND

Manning describes his mother and father at length as cold, austere disciplinarians who offered him no love.¹⁶ Keeping these memories and nursing them certainly is unhealthy. This kind of thinking and mental rehearsing only disrupted his life further. It must also be underscored that Manning's parents are dead and we have only his side of the story (Proverbs 18:17). Many people have had a tough upbringing and have made the decision to leave the past behind and make their lives totally different. With Christ in our lives we are redeemed and released from the vain habit patterns of our parents according to 1 Peter 1:18.

Those who did not have an ideal childhood gain no advantage in detailing all their parents' faults. We should not allow the sins of our parents to determine us. All of that is in God's hands. For the Christian, love keeps no record of wrongs (1 Corinthians 13:5, NIV). Living by constantly looking back only gives us — and makes us — pains in the neck.

In Ezekiel's day, the Israelites were moving into a mind-set of not taking personal responsibility for their sins and blaming their parents for the consequences. The prophet declared:

"The word of the LORD came to me again, saying, 'What do you mean when you use this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying: "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge"?' 'As I live,' says the Lord GOD, 'you shall no longer use this proverb in Israel.' ... 'The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear

the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself'" (Ezekiel 18:1-3, 20).

Manning tells of his time in the care of a psychologist.¹⁷ Many psychologists are trained to take people on an excursion into their childhood, dredging up old memories rather than focusing on current responsibilities, opportunities, and blessings. This type of mental archaeology can bog down and ruin a life. Apparently this is the technique employed with Manning. Around age 8, Manning remembers, he confronted his mother and told her he hated her for loving his brother more than she did him. In his description of the event, his mother snapped and began to pummel him severely. It was his grandmother who told her to stop the beating. The psychologist's interpretation was that this experience had muzzled Manning's emotions.¹⁸ A biblical counselor would have concluded that Manning should own his part in disrespecting and dishonoring his mother, while the psychologist just gave him more grist and more excuses for his irresponsibility. What happens to us is not as important as the interpretation we place on what happened. Such things, looked at properly, do not ruin us. They can teach us to be better parents.

MOMMY DEAREST MADE ME DO IT

Manning took a negative approach and says of his recollection about his mother:

"For days, I sat with that memory in the beauty of Colorado, trying to refeel it and grieve it as best I could. ... Mine was a childhood of repeated rejection and punishment or the threat of it."¹⁹

We could call this nursing bitterness. Manning concludes he is just stuck in some kind of generational determinism when he says, "But the dragon doesn't die easily, so the

shame just kept passing down the generations. I fear I've passed it along as well."²⁰ Manning's sycophants need to give him a wake-up call rather than humor him. For one who is always talking about grace, this shows his low view of grace. Grace is bigger than our past, our hurts, and even the poor example of our parents. We are conquerors and winners in Christ (Romans 8:37). Manning's thinking just does not line up with Philippians 4:8:

"Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, what-

his guilt and bitterness were so great he sought comfort in a bottle.

Manning also claims that at age 8, he started to live the life of "the impostor" because his mother did not like the Christmas gift he gave her.²² Manning points to his mother as the reason he goes into his "impostor" mode, not a sinful child handling life poorly. Manning is now approaching 80, but still acting as if he were 8. Manning then provides bullet points "of how the impostor functions":

- The impostor lives in fear.
- The impostor is consumed with a need for acceptance and approval.

be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you *put on* the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore, *putting away* lying, 'Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor,' for we are members of one another" (Ephesians 4:22-25).

Manning took the other route and remained the impostor while claiming that grace made it acceptable.

Manning started drinking heavily at 16, because it gave him confidence.²⁴ He confesses, "At age eighteen I experienced my first alcohol-induced blackout at the hand of Seagram's. ... By the age of twenty I had acquired the nickname 'Funnel.'"²⁵ Manning discovered he could still function even with hangovers. When he began attending college he found out that he could speak well before others. He dropped out of college in his second year to join the Marines.²⁶ While in the service he was eventually transferred to the newspaper office where he began to hone his writing skills. After a discharge in 1955, he returned to college to study journalism.²⁷ Manning again dropped out of college to attend a Franciscan seminary in Loretto, Pa., looking for more. "More what?" he writes, "I wasn't exactly sure."²⁸

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED?

Manning recounts that while in seminary chapel, kneeling at the twelfth station of the cross, he lapsed into a blackout or mystical trance for three hours. He labels those lost three hours "the Golden World."²⁹ While in that mystical state, he writes that Jesus called him by name, gave him secret information that he has never revealed, and provided him with a secret name. Manning says of the experience that "I was battered by wave after wave of the theology of delight, that God not only loves me but also likes me."³⁰

If this is supposed to be Manning's "conversion" experience there are a few components that are at odds with Scripture. The first is the absence of repentance and his seeking of forgive-

For all his talk of unconditional grace, Manning himself is harsh, judgmental, and unforgiving.

ever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy — meditate on these things."

Manning's lifelong pattern of nursing negative thinking and the absence of biblical thinking has only aggravated his misery and given him an excuse to keep drinking heavily.

In page after page of his autobiography, he recounts his mother's transgressions. The biblical mandates of "love your enemy" or "pray for those who despitefully use you" seem to be foreign to Manning. And it must be asked, why isn't grace providing those things for him? For all his talk of unconditional grace, Manning himself is harsh, judgmental, and unforgiving. With regard to his mother, he even writes that when she died in 1993 in Belmar, N.J., he ensconced himself in a motel, drank himself into a blackout, and did not attend her funeral.²¹ Some would conclude that

- The impostor is codependent; in other words, out of touch with his or her own feelings.
- The impostor's life is a herky-jerky existence of elation and depression. The impostor is what he or she does.
- The impostor demands to be noticed.
- The impostor cannot experience intimacy in any relationship.
- And last but not least, the impostor is a liar."²³

The answer to this is that God and the true reception of grace changes impostors and enables them to be genuine. The Apostle Paul tells us to "put off" and "put on." For example, he instructs believers:

"that you *put off*, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and

ness. On the day of Pentecost Peter confronted unbelieving Jews and said, "Repent" (Acts 2:38). That repentance was to be followed by believer's baptism. Acts 5:31 says that God exalted Jesus to "give repentance to Israel and the forgiveness of sins." Then in Acts 11:18, the Jews of Jerusalem rejoiced that "God has granted the Gentiles repentance to life." In Acts 20:21, Paul declares that he testified to "Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul's continuing message was "that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance" (Acts 26:20).

Repentance is turning from sin and self to Jesus as the only hope of forgiveness and salvation. True repentance abandons any hope of self-effort for eternal life and clings only to the Savior. Manning's mystical experience is devoid of repentance and he says that Jesus really liked him just the way he was with no change on his part. It implies that Jesus was not concerned with the way Manning lived, only that he knew he was liked. It is really the misunderstanding and manipulation of grace turning it into license. Those who have truly responded to Christ and grace have the desire and the empowerment to "put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts" (Ephesians 4:22). Manning has vigorously fed "the old man" and called it grace.

The second aspect of his testimony that clashes with Scripture is the claim of secret information and a secret name. These claims conflict directly with Jesus' own words: "I spoke openly to the world. I always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where the Jews always meet, and in secret I have said nothing" (John 18:20).

Perhaps Manning's idea of a secret name came out of a faulty and skewed interpretation of Revelation 3:12. In that verse Jesus speaks of a future event in which He will bestow honor upon those who overcome: "I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God." Another of the things

yet ahead is, "I will write on him My new name." However, there is obviously no mystical trance in this verse and it says that this name (whatever it is) will be written on all overcomers one day in the New Jerusalem.

The pillar speaks of giving someone honor as it refers "to the custom of honoring a magistrate by placing a pillar in his name."³¹

The idea of a new name is also found in Revelation 2:17 and 14:1. The breastplate of the High Priest contained twelve stones, one for each of the tribes of Israel. On each stone the tribe's name was inscribed. The name written on the stone and held on the High Priest's heart spoke of acceptance, belonging, and intimacy.

The new name in Revelation speaks of a future intimacy of believers with Christ that really cannot be explained fully unless experienced. It will be a new kind of intimacy never before experienced in this life. The hymn writer tried to capture it in these words: "Face to face— what will it be, When with rapture I behold Him, Jesus Christ who died for me?"³² With new, glorified bodies like Jesus' there will be an intimacy and identification that cannot be described in this realm.

The "new name" of Revelation 3:12 also echoes the fact that all through the Bible the Lord Himself changed the names of individuals as a token of what they would become in the future. God knew the potential of those whom he called. We will only know that new name spoken of in the book of Revelation in eternity when we have full and unbroken fellowship with Christ and finally become all that God intended. Meanwhile, true believers are always moving in that direction as they seek by grace to be more like Jesus.

WANTING MORE — NEVER SATISFIED

Manning's loss of time during his three-hour "Golden World" experience might be explained any number of ways: alcohol, a vivid imagination, his admitted casual relationship with the truth,³³ or even spiritual decep-

tion. Whatever the case may be, Manning says this experience spurred him to become a priest. He was ordained on May 18, 1963, and celebrated his first Mass. At ordination Franciscans take a new name. Manning selected the name Brennan, but he says that nothing else changed.

Manning began to lose motivation and desire for the Franciscan priesthood because the Pope wanted them to be more educated. Manning wanted a simpler and less responsible existence. He put in a request to be moved to a more cloistered life with a fraternity called the Little Brothers of Jesus. He was told to wait a year, after which he made the move to France in 1967, to involve himself with the Little Brothers.³⁴

Manning grew restless. Once again he says he thought, "*There's got to be more.*"³⁵ Manning concluded that his whole life was ugly and "vitiating with pride."³⁶ He saw himself as worthless and completely useless. Perhaps it could be proposed that he was finally experiencing the conviction of the Holy Spirit as to his true state without a vital connection to and relationship with Jesus Christ. However, Manning's reaction was:

"I determined to commit spiritual suicide, cut myself off from God and the church and the Brothers, turn my back on it all. I didn't know what else I could do."³⁷

The biblical response, of course, would have been to turn to God and cry out for forgiveness.

With the assistance of a fellow priest and a Scripture verse (Matthew 5:3), Manning was led to conclude that he was poor in spirit. He did not see that he was experiencing his true sinful state so that he might cry out for a Savior from his sin, but rather thought that he was really okay to feel this way and that "it's okay not to be okay."³⁸ Someone truly poor in spirit would know that it is not okay to glibly declare himself fine in the sight of God. Manning may have also forgotten Matthew 5:6, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be

filled." One trustworthy commentator shares this in regard to those poor in spirit:

"These are the men and women who recognize the fact that they have no spiritual assets. They confess their lost condition and so rely upon divine grace."³⁹

Manning appears disdainful of passionate and aggressive evangelistic preaching:

"I've met many people who've told me that the doorway to salvation was a hellfire preacher pounding John 3:16. But that's not how it was for me."⁴⁰

Of course, Manning is creating an extreme and a caricature. In no way does John 3:16 have to be pounded, but by framing it this way Manning tries to avoid this biblical imperative.

Despite Manning's twist on being "poor in spirit," he progressed very little as he confesses his ongoing inconsistent nature and dissatisfied spirit:

"You see me here one moment about to commit spiritual harakiri and the next moment acting like someone who could[n't] care less about the ways of God. When I wrote once about 'the inconsistent, unsteady disciples whose cheese is falling off their cracker,' I was talking about myself."⁴¹

ON THE ROAD — AGAIN!

Manning became restless after only two years with the Brothers, moving from France to Ohio to become a chaplain at a Franciscan University. He said his "primary responsibility was to organize liturgies, prayer meetings, and weekend retreats."⁴² It was also there where he became part of the Cursillo Movement. This new fad stressed Catholicism, the Eucharist, and the Charismatic Movement. At this point, Manning believed this was part of the "more" he had been searching for.⁴³ But after another two years he was on the move again, transferring to Alabama to establish an experimental community. He landed a job working on shrimp boats.⁴⁴ On Friday nights, he and his

co-workers would host the Eucharist in an innovative folk Mass, along with wine and cheese parties, which were a big draw to the locals. Combining work and play, this certainly cast Manning as a friend of the community, all the while he continued with his alcohol addiction. Two years later, the Franciscan hierarchy deemed the experiment a failure.⁴⁵

That failure was followed by a move to Fort Lauderdale, Fla., as a campus minister at Broward Community College. Manning says of his job there:

"I learned what was expected of me and learned what I could get away with. To say 'I was spending time in prayer' was sometimes true but other times merely a spiritual facade to cover my laziness."⁴⁶

Manning further divulges the horrific and devastating effects of his lifetime of alcohol abuse and addiction. He discusses the toll alcohol took on his brain:

"The medical name for it is Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome; I know it as 'wet brain.' It has to do with a thiamine deficiency brought about by poor nutritional habits; in other words, the person replaces food with alcohol. Over time this deficit causes significant brain-cell death. One of the telling signs of this syndrome is mental confusion, sometimes to the point of insisting upon events that did not happen."⁴⁷

This could be another clue to his "Golden World" experience.

When Manning speaks of the times he stopped drinking he really means he drank less. He was always having "a few beers with friends or wine with meals" and admits, "it wasn't that I had ever really stopped drinking."⁴⁸ These all were a prelude to Florida where Manning says that he began to drink so heavily it reminded him of the times "when my nickname was Funnel."⁴⁹

Manning would try to sober up on weekends when he had speaking

engagements. However, he wound up at Hazelden, a rehab center in Minnesota. He recalls his leaving the facility resistant to any tough love they dispensed:

"I would love to tell you that one day in Hazelden I was on my knees in the center of the room sobbing hysterically, owning up to my drinking and lies. But that never happened. Max [a co-patient] left the treatment center a broken man but also a changed man. I left the center known as 'a tough nut to crack.' I was clean and sober but far from honest."⁵⁰

FOR BETTER OR WORSE, BUT NOT FOR LONG

Manning was ready to move on again, this time to New Orleans where he met with success on a speaking circuit as an alcoholic priest. It was in Louisiana where he met and then developed a relationship with Roslyn, a lady whom he would eventually marry.⁵¹ Manning recounts how in the 1960s, a Roman Catholic Church council called Vatican II was developed by Pope John XXIII.⁵² This allowed more open expression in the Catholic Church and Manning, along with many others, began questioning priestly celibacy and the denial of marriage for priests. He resigned from the priesthood in 1982 and then was married. Francis MacNutt, another former, now married, Catholic priest performed the ceremony.⁵³

The wedlock led to the withdrawal of his future speaking engagements; and also led to the alienation of family and friends. Manning became father to his wife's two daughters by a prior marriage and he confesses, "I had no idea what I was supposed to do."⁵⁴ Manning and his wife began to fall on hard financial times even when speaking invitations began to come in again. One of those invitations came from the late Mike Yaconelli of Youth Specialties, a recognized leader in the emergent church movement.⁵⁵

Manning acknowledges closeting himself in motels and drinking for days.⁵⁶ He once disappeared for nine days.⁵⁷ He was doing all of this while he was teaching hundreds how to live

life. His wife at times would beg him to come home. He would have to try to sober up.

After 16 years, Manning and Roslyn separated. Two years later, in 2000, their divorce was final. Once again, Manning stumbled. What is truly shocking is that Manning, now a divorced drunk, flourished in his new persona as a Christian writer, dispenser of godly wisdom, and conference speaker.

Manning had developed a small group which he called the Notorious Sinners, who met annually for get-togethers. He boasts:

"It's probably helpful to know that one of the rules of the Sinners has always been 'There are no rules.'"⁵⁸

That does mark his life. He reminisces how he and a friend "would get drunk and talk about God for hours and hours."⁵⁹ This kind of sinful boasting comes from a depraved mind and is perverse. In Proverbs 23 we see God's attitude of drunkenness:

"Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has contentions? Who has complaints? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? Those who linger long at the wine, those who go in search of mixed wine. Do not look on the wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it swirls around smoothly; at the last it bites like a serpent, and stings like a viper. Your eyes will see strange things, and your heart will utter perverse things. ... 'They have struck me, but I was not hurt; they have beaten me, but I did not feel it. When shall I awake, that I may seek another drink?'" (Proverbs 23:29-33, 35)

Manning's name could be inscribed on these verses. So could many others were it not for the true grace of God that delivered them. Salvation in Christ can change all that. In the end, Manning's book may be a tutorial for blossoming drunkards on how to blame-shift and scapegoat through

life, deny that it is sin and then mask it under the heading of grace. The Scriptures, however, have a contrary view: "Woe to men mighty at drinking wine. Woe to men valiant for mixing intoxicating drink" (Isaiah 5:22).

One of the untold tragedies of alcohol addiction is the squandering of money which could have been used for nobler purposes.

Thinking back on the Proverbs verse, the phrase "your eyes will see strange things, and your heart will utter perverse things," takes us to another otherworldly experience which Manning claims to have had in 2003. He alleges to have seen his mother as a six-year-old orphan, and then as an aged woman. Her message to him: "You know, I messed up a lot when you were a kid. But you turned out okay."⁶⁰

In this section of his book, Manning claims to have forgiven his mother. However, when God forgives us, he buries our sins and leaves no grave markers. He does not bring our confessed sins to mind. Manning's forgiveness sounds rather hollow because he has used page after page after page vividly chronicling his mother's sins and failures; all of which he claims to have forgiven. Here he has created a permanent record of her transgressions for all to ponder. Is this forgiveness, or is it really being disingenuous? Realistically, it is just more confusion and lack of a clear understanding on Manning's part making himself look like the hero.

It is unbiblical to say we forgive someone and then dredge up their sins and chronicle them in a book. Biblical counselor Jay Adams tells us:

"What one must do is to commit himself to the *hard* task of promising not to raise the matter of the offense again. That is the essence of granting forgiveness. When one sincerely avoids mentioning the offense to his brother, when he refuses to discuss it with anyone else, and when he puts it out of his own mind by

declining to think and dwell upon it in resentment or self-pity, the *feelings* of forgiveness soon will accompany the promise and commitment."⁶¹

Similarly, Christian lawyer and author Ken Sande informs as to the dynamics of biblical forgiveness and what that means:

"We must release the person who has wronged us from the penalty of being separated from us. We must not hold wrongs against others, not think about the wrongs, and not punish others for them. Therefore, forgiveness may be described as a decision to make four promises: 'I will not dwell on this incident.' 'I will not bring up this incident again and use it against you.' 'I will not talk to others about this incident.' 'I will not let this incident stand between us or hinder our personal relationship.'"⁶²

VIBRANT GRACE, NOT VULGAR GRACE

Manning's book is a sad read. It is not about honesty, but sheer hypocrisy and arrogance. Manning has spent his life marketing his sins under the guise of grace. He lived the life of a defensive drunkard in lying, evading, and in denial. His cover up is a distortion of grace. Some, over the years, questioned Manning about his sinful and evil lifestyle while he claimed grace. Rather than agree that such a question was valid, he characterized their inquiry as a "loaded pharisaical grenade,"⁶³ when, in reality, he was the perfect Pharisee and hypocrite. His stock answer for his horrendous lifestyle is smug and evasive. He says, "These things happen."⁶⁴ Maybe some things do happen, but when those things are sins and they keep on happening for years on end, someone is to blame. Manning has to face the unintended consequences of the sinful choices he has made.

Manning, an approaching octogenarian, is living a reclusive life in Belmar, N.J. He is beset by physical problems and severe mental lapses

because of a life of alcohol abuse, needing daily assistance from a care giver. The consequences of the alcohol and “wet brain” are slowly taking their final sad toll. Manning broke all the rules and in the end the rules broke him.

It is not difficult to understand why Manning creates confusion and why some would think he might be some kind of slightly mutant Evangelical. Like many alcoholics, he has the gift of gab. He can talk about grace, spiced with a bit of evangelical seasoning and terminology; but his interpretations and rationalizations are never true to the Gospel. He believes that the human family is also automatically God’s spiritual family, but they really do not know it yet. Here again he errs biblically. He misapplies many Scriptures, those which belong to born-again believers, applying them instead to the lost. His use of Ephesians 4:6, that God is “Father of all and in you all” is an example of his faulty exegesis. The passage addresses those who are in Christ, and not to all as Manning supposes.⁶⁵

In his memoirs Manning says he no longer cares that people accuse him of “cheap grace.”⁶⁶ He has picked up another term coined by an Episcopal priest, Robert Farrar Capon: “vulgar grace.”⁶⁷ This means, according to Capon, “that in him, every last person on earth is already home free ... The entire show has been set to rights in the Mystery of Christ — even though nobody can see a single improvement.”⁶⁸ This idea turns the grace of God into license and lewdness.

Brennan Manning’s life was a horrible mess even by the world’s standards. His distorted view of grace, gratuitously applied to all, produced in his own life the by-product of a man mired in gross sinful habits, drunkenness, and broken commitments. He is a man who was always seeking something more, but never seemed to find it. He is a man who thought that God and grace always accepted anything he wished to do and anyway he wished to live. Manning is totally self-centered and does not care for others or he would not be

living in violation of Romans 14:12-13, being a constant stumbling block to the weak.

No one is perfect, but the true believer, enabled by grace and God’s indwelling Spirit, seeks to have failures less and less and few and far between. Even in failure there is to be remorse over the failure, repentance, and recovery (1 John 1), not celebration and contentment. It is heresy to say grace sets me free, and then go on sinning cavalierly. The Christian life is not about perfection, but it certainly is about direction. Sincere Christians know as well if they lose their way and start in the wrong direction they will experience God’s loving hand of chastisement (Hebrews 12:1-14) as God’s way of calling them back to righteous living. Truly understanding grace creates thanksgiving and desire for God’s ways, not loose living.

Brennan Manning is a man who talks a lot about grace. Yet he does not seem to understand that grace not only saves, but that it also enables us and equips us to live above constant and unbroken habit patterns of sin and failure. The Bible teaches this clearly and explicitly:

“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, *teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age*” (Titus 2:11-12, emphasis added).

Grace teaches us to reject sin, not embrace it and flaunt it. Grace gives us the want-to and empowers us to deny sin and lusts. It is a perversion to live in gross sin and then claim that grace makes it all right. Grace living is not to merit anything, but is simply the result of a recognized acceptance through a relationship with Jesus and the new birth.

It is jarring to read at the end of Manning’s book:

“If you asked me whether what I have done in my life defines my life, I would answer, ‘No.’”⁶⁹

If our lifestyle and habits do not define us, then what does?

We know by Manning’s own words what defined him. He goes on to say that his “calling” has been to “a life filled with family and friends and alcohol and Jesus and Roslyn.”⁷⁰ These are startling words. How would Roslyn and her family answer that when they know what really filled his life? More importantly, how would Jesus answer that?

THE SAD END OF THE ROAD

Christ saves us where we are, as we are, *but does not leave us that way*. To sing “Just as I Am” does not mean “Leave me as I am” (1 Corinthians 6:9-13). Manning never seemed to understand that redemption means a setting free from the grinding, binding penalty and power of sin over our daily lives. Yes, there is struggle and temptation and, yes, this is a progressive work of God. That means that where grace and the Holy Spirit are truly active there is progress. The Apostle Paul tells the Thessalonians of his desire that they progress in holiness. He tells them to “stand fast” or to hold fast to all the things he taught them. As he does, he ties together the wonderful concepts of God’s love, consolation, hope, and *grace*, and he desires that these things not only comfort their hearts but also “*establish you in every good word and work*” (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17, emphasis added). G.H. Lang wrote:

“None more firmly than Paul rejected works, before or after conversion, as a ground of salvation; none more firmly demanded good works as a consequence of salvation.”⁷¹

The theme of the book of Titus is the practice of maintaining good works after one comes to salvation (Titus 2:1-15; 3:8, 14).

Manning is a man lost at sea in a storm. When thrown a life saver he stayed in the dark, murky, alcohol-filled waters and told others who were dying around him that they were all okay. He was satisfied to refuse the life preserver while he kept on treading water. A life preserver is of no value unless one commits himself to it and allows himself to be

pulled to safety. Grace believed is not the same as grace received and Christ believed is not the same as Christ received. One can only hope and pray that Manning will abandon his false message and cast himself upon God's grace and the only "lifesaver" — Jesus Christ.

For those who say this is a judgmental article, we respond by pointing them to the Apostle Paul who gives his judgment when he said, "do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18). What is dramatic is the hard literal meaning of the English word dissipation. The Greek word *asotia* literally means *no salvation*. It is viewed as squandering and dissipating of all and every resource. This is the judgment of Paul regarding those who make alcohol their god.

Manning found a way to assuage his guilt and justify his lifestyle. He simply created a god who went along with anything he wanted to do and kept assuring him that he was okay. Pagans have been creating gods in their image for centuries. Followers of the god Bacchus, both in Greece and Rome, often drank themselves into drunken stupors with Bacchus' approval. Manning's manufactured god even goes along with his distorted redefining of grace.

The book of Jude warns against the danger of turning God's grace into lewdness (v. 4). James B. De Young's commentary on 1 John 1:6-10 speaks to false claims answered by contrasting genuine truths:

"The first false claim (1:6) is to have fellowship with God while continuing to 'walk' (live) in 'darkness' (sin). ... John's response is two-fold: we lie and we do not live (practice) the truth. ... We contradict the truth by words and by deeds."⁷²

So God's grace and God's Spirit lead us to take sin seriously and deal with it biblically. The Apostle Paul always struggled to keep his conscience clean and clear before God (Acts 23:1; 24:16), and as a result he could tell other believers to follow

him (2 Thessalonians 3:7, 9). Brennan Manning could never say that. He is to be pitied, not published; refuted, not applauded.

This article was written with a deep sense of sadness that one man could be so deceived and influence so many — and sadness over the misuse of God's precious grace. Manning's brand of grace has not taught his heart to fear, neither has it brought him safe thus far. And saddest of all, it is grace which will not lead him home.

Endnotes:

1. See Ray Yungen, *A Time of Departing*. Silverton, Ore.: Lighthouse Trails Publishing Company, 2002, pp. 78-85, 93, 131-133, 136.
2. Beth Moore, *When Godly People Do Ungodly Things*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002, pp. 72-73.
3. Agnieszka Tennant, "A 'Coward' Who Stayed to Help," *Christianity Today*, interview posted 10/06/2005, Editor's Note added 10/10/2005. Document accessed at: www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/140/42.0.html.
4. Jackie Alnor, "The Ragamuffin Gospel," book review posted on Protestant Apologetics and Theology Web site, no posting date, brackets in original. Document accessed at: www.ovrind.com/Universalism/RagaGospel.html.
5. Brennan Manning with John Blase, *All Is Grace, A Ragamuffin Memoir*. Colorado Springs, Co.: David C. Cook, 2011.
6. *Ibid.*, pg. 118.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20, italics in original.
8. T.H.L. Parker in Everett F. Harrison, Editor-in-chief, *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1960, pg. 258.
9. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Grace*. Findley, Ohio: Dunham Publishing Company, 1947, pg. 25.
10. Charles Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1976, note on Ephesians 2:8, pg. 1781.
11. *All Is Grace*, op. cit., pp. 26-27.
12. *Ibid.*, pg. 31.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *The Ryrie Study Bible*, op. cit., note on James 4:7-10, pg. 1861.
15. *All Is Grace*, op. cit., pg. 33.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 38-47.
17. *Ibid.*, pg. 52.
18. *Ibid.*, pg. 53.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, pg. 55.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 176-177.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 56-58.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 75-76.
25. *Ibid.*, pg. 76.

26. *Ibid.*, pg. 81.
27. *Ibid.*, pg. 87.
28. *Ibid.*, pg. 89.
29. *Ibid.*, pg. 91.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *The Ryrie Study Bible*, op. cit., note on Revelation 3:12, pg. 1899.
32. Carrie E. Breck, "Face to Face," *The Celebrational Hymnal*. No city: Word Music/Integrity Music, 1997, Hymn 781.
33. *All Is Grace*, op. cit., pg. 118.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 97-99.
35. *Ibid.*, pg. 101, italics in original.
36. *Ibid.*, pg. 102.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*, pg. 103.
39. Harry A. Ironside, *Expository Notes on the Gospel of Matthew*. New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1948, pg. 45.
40. *All Is Grace*, op. cit., pg. 103.
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*, pg. 110.
43. *Ibid.*, pg. 111.
44. *Ibid.*, pg. 112.
45. *Ibid.*, pg. 113.
46. *Ibid.*, pg. 117.
47. *Ibid.*, pp. 115-116.
48. *Ibid.*, pg. 117.
49. *Ibid.*, pg. 118.
50. *Ibid.*, pg. 120.
51. *Ibid.*, pp. 126-136.
52. *Ibid.*, pp. 130-131.
53. *Ibid.*, pg. 136.
54. *Ibid.*, pg. 138.
55. *Ibid.*, pg. 140.
56. *Ibid.*, pg. 146.
57. *Ibid.*, pg. 147.
58. *Ibid.*, pg. 159.
59. *Ibid.*, pg. 161.
60. *Ibid.*, pg. 196.
61. Jay E. Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1973, pg. 70, italics in original.
62. Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2004, pg. 209, emphasis added.
63. *All Is Grace*, op. cit., pg. 177.
64. *Ibid.*, pg. 178.
65. Manning's book, *The Wisdom of Tenderness* (San Francisco: Harper, 2002), clearly teaches throughout an application of tenderness and grace to all, simply because they are human. This is a subtle form of universalism.
66. *All Is Grace*, op. cit., pg. 192.
67. *Ibid.*
68. *Ibid.*, pg. 193.
69. *Ibid.*, pg. 183.
70. *Ibid.*, pp. 183-184.
71. G.H. Lang quoted in F.F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955, pg. 493.
72. James B. De Young in Walter A. Elwell, Editor, *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1989, pg. 1179.

