

GRITS, GRACE, AND GOODNESS



Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc.  
6316 Peake Road  
Macon, Georgia 31210-3960  
1-800-747-3016  
©2003 by Smyth & Helwys Publishing  
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Printed in the United States of America.

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of  
American National Standard for Information Sciences—  
Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials.  
ANSI Z39.48–1984. (alk. paper)

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Wellborn, Charles  
Grits, grace, and goodness / Charles Wellborn.  
p. cm.  
ISBN 1-57312-410-9 (alk. paper)  
1. Theology.  
2. Baptists—Doctrines.  
3. Christian ethics—Baptist authors.  
I. Title.  
BX6332 .W45 2003  
230'.60—dc21

2003000840

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## INTRODUCTION

*If the meaning of life could be contained in a sentence,  
there would be no need of telling stories.*

—Henry Van Dyke (adapted)

A perceptive commentary bound with a personal story is to be cherished precisely because life is short and complex. *Grits, Grace, and Goodness* represents the faithful testimony of one pilgrim as he shares the fruit of a capacious Christian mind. It is the saga of a man well-born, with gifts, abilities and awareness far beyond average.

These gifts opened opportunities to the lad from the piney woods of Texas who became championship college debater, ski-troop soldier, boy-wonder preacher, national radio speaker, university professor, and citizen of two different English-speaking worlds. A minister's compassion and a prophet's responsibility have seasoned his life and work since his early twenties.

I have known about Charles Wellborn most of my life, as people variously called him the finest preacher they had heard, the clearest voice of conscience among his generation of Baptists, and the best professor they ever had. But I did not meet him until he came to Samford University in the summer of 1999 for "Revival Revisited," a remembrance of the great southern youth revivalists, then in their seventies, who had touched so many lives just after World War II. Less intense and assertive than I expected, totally noncompetitive for attention or the podium, disciplined by age and experience, constrained by a greater modesty than most men of his attainment, he nevertheless





demonstrated his ability as a pulpit marksman, rightly dividing the truth and allowing it to pierce the conscience, leaving his voiceprint on listeners' minds.

Rare these days is Dr. Wellborn's incisive reflection upon issues of faith, unfiltered by partisanship, nor mirrored in the language of Zion, nor telescoped into jive talk. The reader is compelled to follow the openhearted, open-minded oratory of the sermon, the candor of the essay, and the tenderness of the autobiography!

There is no denying that Charles Wellborn, child of the Southwest and the South, is from the land of grits. Grace came to him in forms beyond explanation—in wartime survival, in finding Christian faith, in the bonds of friends and family, in the bliss of an agile mind, and in dear colleagues. The goodness came to him recognizably from his Lord, the impact of home and family, the formative experiences of university years, the youth revival movement, the satisfaction of work well done. But goodness was also his to impart to those in need—in direct ministry, as university academic, as neighbor, and as friend.

If life cannot be reduced to a single sentence, and if “we will understand it better by and by,” then *Grits, Grace, and Goodness* is an enormous help in the here and now.

Thomas E. Corts, President  
Samford University  
Thanksgiving 2002

## FOREWORD

Charles Wellborn hit Baylor after World War II like a ton of bricks. He came back a decorated ski trooper. He was a brilliant student. He was a uniquely gifted speaker. He was a natural-born preacher. He was a native East Texan still completely comfortable with his roots and his values, his family, and his friends in spite of cruel war, broadening travel, sophisticated Europe, and hair-raising adventures. He stood out like a mighty oak in a mesquite pasture.

Like Venus on a summer evening, his first magnitude presence compelled both attention and respect. After an astoundingly impressive career in preaching, teaching, and university administration, it was natural for him, in retirement, to direct some of his prodigious energies into the kind of writing that has produced this book.

As the editor and publisher of *Christian Ethics Today* for more than five years, I enthusiastically welcomed every essay he ever submitted to me for inclusion in that journal. Our readers promptly embraced his regular offerings, and a fiercely loyal readership formed, attesting to the superior quality of his work.

The essays in this book reflect authentic Christian experience, impeccable Christian ethics, exceptional spiritual insight, admirable maturity, seasoned judgment, unaffected erudition, uncommon common sense, and genuine wisdom.

Read this book. Underline its passages. Read it again. Then go out to the bookstore and get extra copies to give to treasured friends.

Foy Valentine  
Dallas, Texas  
Fall 2002





## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**T**he perceptive reader who comes to this material will immediately recognize that there is no true unifying structure to the volume. This is inevitable, since it is a collection of occasional pieces written or spoken over a period spanning many years. The reader will also be able to detect changes in ideas or understandings. I do not apologize for that. One's ideas and understandings inevitably change across the years—and ought to. I trust that the reader will also be tolerant of the fact, given the nature of this material, that there is now and again repetition in the text.

Although I am a professional academic, I have not written these articles primarily for my academic peers. I value their opinions, and I trust I have been academically respectable throughout, but I hope for a wider readership that includes not only clerics and professional religious workers but also the lay public, both those who are professing Christians and those who are not.

In an attempt to give the material some basic structure, I have organized the book into three sections. The first part deals with broader issues of the Christian faith and of general theology. Several of the articles in this section are based upon sermons delivered at various times and places, and they certainly carry the flavor of the pulpit and are shaped in terms of the audiences to which they were delivered. The second part of this volume includes articles dealing with more specific issues in the realm of Christian ethics—issues such as truth-telling, murder, the pleasure-principle, and various political, economic, and technological questions. Several are reflections of contemporary problems particularly important at the time when they were written.





Part three of the collection contains a single essay that I have titled “Credo.” It is an attempt to summarize, after more than a half century of ministry as a preacher, pastor, and teacher, where my faith stands today. It is, in a real sense, my valedictory.

No thinker who dares to commit his ideas to print and the scrutiny of a reading public can fail to be aware of his indebtedness to manifold influences that have come to bear on his thought and experience. Many of those influences are unconscious and cannot be explicitly acknowledged. There is no way that I can pay tribute to them. Others are more explicit, and I have an obligation, as best I can, to recognize them here.

None of us can divorce ourselves from our educational experience, which is always relevant and crucial. My undergraduate study was at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, and it was a formative time for me. The overall Christian ethos of that institution meant much to me, but I must mention the lasting influence of men like Ralph Lynn of the Department of History; Leonard Duce of the Department of Philosophy; George Humphrey of the Department of Religion; and, perhaps most important of all, that academic ogre, A. J. Armstrong, of the Department of English, who bullied and loved me into a recognition that I should never for one moment be satisfied with anything I had accomplished to that point.

My first theological education was at Southwestern Baptist Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. It was a crucial time for me, and I express gratitude for the influence and teaching of Stewart Newman, professor of the philosophy of religion; Robert Daniel, professor of Old Testament; Ray Summers, professor of New Testament; and, especially, T. B. Maston, professor of Christian Ethics, who deeply influenced all my future thought in this field.

My doctoral education was at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. I was fortunate to sit at the feet of John Hallowell, professor of Political Science, and, in the Graduate School of Religion, Hans Hillerbrand, Creighton Lacey, and Waldo Beach. I must express special gratitude to Professor Beach, whose interest went far beyond the academic limits to invest itself in my personal and professional problems at a difficult time in my own life.

All of us are shaped intellectually by those thinkers whose ideas have helped to form our own perspectives. Those who are familiar with the works of the Niebuhr brothers, H. Richard and Reinhold, cannot fail to see their formative



influences in my thought. Paul Tillich, the German-American theologian, has made a major impact. Perhaps most important of all is the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian/martyr. I express my gratitude to them.

All my life I have been primarily a preacher, and there are preachers who have materially helped me to understand what Christian preaching is all about. Foremost among them is James Stewart, the late, great Scottish pulpiteer—in my judgment, the finest preacher I have ever heard in the pulpit. I not only studied with Dr. Stewart in New College, the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, but I followed him from church to church in Edinburgh as he preached in order to hear his sermons. His influence was compounded when he graciously took me into his home and his friendship, and that relationship remained an important component of my own existence until his death.

I must also acknowledge the impact of Carlyle Marney, a magnificent preacher/prophet, not only in terms of his pulpit work but also because of his personal friendship and guidance. When I was a student at Duke University, my pastor was Warren Carr of Watts Street Baptist Church in Durham, North Carolina. Warren is a perceptive preacher and a compassionate human being, and his ministry meant much to me.

Finally, in this area, I must acknowledge my more recent debt to the congregation of which I am presently a member, and to its pastor. Greg Earwood and Faith Baptist Church in Georgetown, Kentucky, have ministered to me in manifold ways. They are a courageous and prophetic church, and I owe them a deep debt.

I was privileged to be a member of the faculty of Florida State University in Tallahassee for almost thirty years. I must pay my tribute to Bernie Sliger, the former president of the University, for his consistent encouragement and support throughout my academic career. I am grateful for the friendship and intellectual influence of my faculty colleagues there, especially Paul Piccard and Douglas St. Angelo of the Department of Political Science, Eugene Tancy of the Department of English, and my associates in the Department of Religion—Robert Spivey, John Carey, William Swain, Walter Moore, Richard Rubenstein, Leo Sandon, and the late John Priest.

Any individual is not only a product of academic and intellectual experiences but also of personal ones. One's close friends make deep impacts upon one's ideas and consciousness. Here I must first express my gratitude to a remarkable group of



young men and women. The individuals who, by the grace of God, were chosen to be part of the great Youth Revival movement of the late 1940s and early 1950s made a lasting contribution to my life and thought. Jack Robinson, Howard Butt, Bruce McIver, Foy Valentine, Ralph Langley, Jess Moody, Bo Baker, Dick Baker, Frank Boggs, Warren Hultgren, Bob Harris, Buckner Fanning, Eunice Parker, Ardelle Hallock, Billie Russell, and especially, the late W. F. Howard, our mentor and guide, have impacted my life in indelible ways. The story of this remarkable movement and of these equally remarkable individuals has been told in Bruce McIver's *Riding the Wind of God* (Smyth & Helwys, 2002). Each of them, in his or her own field, has made significant contributions to the kingdom of God. I am grateful to all of them.

Two of my coworkers have left their permanent mark on me. My secretary for the entire time I was a pastor in Waco, Robbie McClain, is a remarkable human being, and she has remained my friend and confidant throughout the years. When I was University Chaplain at Florida State University, the late Jean Blasberg was my faithful and efficient assistant. I would add to this list my special friends in Great Britain where I have spent the last twenty years of my life. Keith Geniau, Gary Symonds, Brian Ellis, and Mary Hall will never know how much their loyalty and association have meant to me.

One's family is always important. I was fortunate to have a godly father and mother who gave me the kind of childhood that many would envy. My sons, Gary and Jon, have demonstrated unswerving loyalty, love, and encouragement. My two sisters—both of them remarkable individuals in their own ways—have given me support and deep affection. Faye Robbins (and her husband, Wayne) and LaVerne Wentworth (and her late husband, Richard) have not always agreed with me theologically, but they have never wavered in their encouragement and tolerance.

A final word is in order. Many of the articles in this volume were first published in the innovative journal *Christian Ethics Today*, founded by Foy Valentine and now edited by Joe Trull. For their encouragement and willingness to publish my material, I am deeply grateful. As far as the publication of this work is concerned, Thomas Corts, Jr., president of Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama, deserves the most credit. Tom and I became friends in the latter years of my life, but that association has proved to be both productive and satisfying. I cannot begin to express my appreciation to him.



All of us are the final product of all those whom we have met and of the totality of our human experience. I have been remarkably fortunate.

Charles Wellborn  
London, England  
March 2002



I





## GRITS, GRACE, AND GOODNESS

*(This article was first published in Christian Ethics Today.)*

I am a Southerner, born and bred. Across the years I have observed that first-time visitors to the “hallowed ground” of the American South undergo a number of culture shocks. One such shock in the first encounter with that omnipresent ingredient on the Southern breakfast plate—grits. Southerners take grits for granted, not so our Yankee friends.

Years ago a friend of mine from Massachusetts came to Tallahassee, Florida, where I was then living. On his first morning in town I picked up my friend at his motel where he had just eaten breakfast.

“What’s that white stuff they put on your plate?” he asked. “That stuff that tastes like wallpaper paste and, if you leave it long enough, turns into concrete?”

My friend’s question reminded me of an old story. A traveler, making his first visit to the South, stopped for breakfast at a roadside cafe in Georgia. From the smiling young Georgia Cracker waitress he ordered bacon and eggs. In a few minutes she brought his order to the table. On the plate were bacon, eggs, and grits. Puzzled, the man called the waitress and, pointing to the white glob, inquired, “What is that?”

“That’s grits,” the waitress replied.

“But I didn’t order grits,” the traveler protested.

The waitress had an explanation. “Grits ain’t something you order. Grits just come.”

“Grits just come.” By some trick of mind those words remind me of grace—that mysterious, almost indefinable working of God





in human experience. Through the centuries Christians have struggled to understand the full meaning of grace. Seeking a terse definition, theologians have defined it as the “unmerited favor of God.” Those words hardly begin to plumb the depths of the concept. Christians attribute their salvation and forgiveness of sin to “Amazing Grace.” Even that is not enough. Christ died not only that men and women might be rescued from their hopeless human predicament, but also that his followers might have aid and assistance in their continuing struggle to be “good.” We call that assistance grace.

Grace is not something we can bargain for or purchase. It cannot be triggered by repeating some magic incantation or carrying out a prescribed sacred ritual. Grace “just comes.”

We are sometimes frightened by grace, for it often arrives at unexpected moments or in unlikely circumstances. We frequently find the workings of grace difficult to understand. It doesn’t always seem to make sense. We play the part of the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son, protesting to the father that his open-armed reception of the prodigal violates all the canons of reasonable common sense. We constantly forget that what we humans call “sanity” does not always accord with the “Divine Sanity” of God.

Clearly, Christians are called to the task of being “good” in every area of life, personal and corporate. Christian ethics, at rock bottom, is all about goodness, and we should never underestimate the difficulty of the assignment. “Being good” is a rough, tough, dangerous job.

In the seventh chapter of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, the Apostle makes a profound confession: “For the good that I would I do not, but the evil that I would not do, that I do.” Paul obviously speaks here out of the depths of his own moral struggle. He points us to the two great difficulties in that struggle. It is often difficult to know what is right, and even if we believe we know the good thing, the job is far from over. It may be even more difficult to do the right.

All of my Christian life I have puzzled over the implications of the ethical teachings of Jesus—the parameters of a truly good life. Some people seem to find these moral dimensions simple. They wear badges, asking “What would Jesus do?” and believe beyond doubt that they know the answer to that question. My experience is different. I am constantly impressed by what I, and others, have called “the hard sayings” of Jesus.



Let me give a few examples out of many. Jesus said, “Love your enemy. Do good to them that persecute you.” As a World War II combat veteran, trained and ordered in that conflict not to love my enemy but to kill him, I find that injunction disturbing. Jesus said, “If a man strike you on one cheek, turn the other.” I wrestle with the seeming contradiction between that statement and my natural inclination to defend myself and my children against unjustified violence. Jesus said, “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone” and “Judge not lest ye be judged.” Painfully aware of my own moral shortcomings, I find it uncomfortable to speak words of condemnation on my fellow human beings, whatever their transgressions. Jesus said, “If a man ask you for your coat, give him your cloak also.” How does that fit in with the apparent necessity to provide for my own material needs and those of my loved ones?

Unhappily, I have no glib answers for these moral dilemmas. Indeed, I distrust the simplistic solutions and the exegetical cartwheels of those who explain to me that Jesus did not really mean what he seems to have said. In terms of loving our enemies, we are told, for instance, that the appropriate moral guideline is to hate the sin but love the sinner. This impresses me as an easy out for many people—a convenient moral escape hatch. In everyday life the sin and the sinner appear inseparable, and to claim to hate sin and love sinners allows some of us to twist the meaning of love into contorted shapes. Once we get our dirty human hands on the word “love,” we can make the word mean what our baser nature wants it to mean. Thus, we are allowed to do misshapen things—things that seriously contradict the essence of God’s love as revealed in Jesus Christ. In the extreme, for example, individuals who classify all abortions as grievous sins may hate that sin so much that they respond by murdering abortion doctors and blowing up abortion clinics, all in the name of God and “goodness.”

True, most of us do not go to that extreme. But is not the difference between many of our actions and that one a matter of degree, and does not the extreme case at least raise the red flag of moral danger?

The truth is that all through Christian history, those people who have sought to take the words of Jesus seriously and to act on them at face value have been judged by most of the world as, at best, mentally unstable, and, at worst, insane. When Jesus willingly “emptied” himself and gave his life on the cross, he did what the world would call an insane act. Paul spoke of it as “the offense of the cross.”



When Francis of Assisi divested himself of all his worldly possessions in order to identify himself totally with his needy and oppressed brothers and sisters, he violated all the standards of common sense. How does one make sense of the choice of Father Damien to submit himself to the perils of a deadly disease for the sake of a few miserable lepers, or of the decision of Albert Schweitzer to use his manifold literary, medical, and musical talents not for the advancement of his personal career, but for the needs of a few hundred African natives?

I have concluded that the moral teaching of Jesus constitutes what I would call “the ethic of the overload.” Again and again we Christians make our “sensible” moral decisions, only to discover with a cold shock that the Jesus-ethic requires much more. When Jesus counsels us to “turn the other cheek,” he is clearly ruling out a tit-for-tat, revengeful response. The “eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth” syndrome has no place in the ethic of love. Many of us believe that we can make a rational case for such restraint, at least in our one-to-one personal relationships. But Jesus seems to be saying that our laudable refusal to react violently is not enough. We must go further and, apparently, invite even more violence from the aggressor. We must actively demonstrate that absolutely nothing another person can do to us will destroy our love for that person as one of God’s children. That’s the ethic of the overload.

When we follow our Master’s instructions to give our needy neighbor our coat, Jesus says, “Not enough! Give away your cloak also.” The ethic of perfect love—the ethic of the overload—constantly demands from us more than human reason or common sense seem to justify. To respond adequately to that ethic requires a sort of reckless faith in the grace of God and, beyond that, the willingness to suffer personally as a result of our action.

This brings us back to that “Divine Sanity.” We must remember our human limits. We are, all of us, enclosed in a box, bounded on every side by the restrictions of time and space. Those restrictions affect everything in our experience, including both our language and our logic. To make matters even more difficult, a pervasive moral corruption is at work in the box and in us. We cannot ignore the fact that evil taints us all. Christians believe that God, in an act of unlimited love, has invaded that box in the person of the Christ. God’s invasion was carried out not only to achieve the salvation of the human race but also to confront men and women with the moral challenge of perfect, unqualified love. The “Word made



flesh” speaks ultimate truth. It transcends in incalculable ways the inadequate time-space language and understanding of a corrupted humanity. God’s ethical language is the language of the moral overload. To be good, in the fullest Christian sense, is to live out a moral pattern that is defined for us from outside the box.

Where does all this leave the committed Christian who sincerely wants to be good? I have learned much from the teaching and example of Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the World War II German theologian. Faced with a choice between the demands of perfect love and the unspeakable evils of Nazi Germany, he finally entered into a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. He did not make that decision easily. He agonized over it. He chose to act with a painful recognition of his own limits. Assessing the concrete situation as best he could, he did what seemed to him the “most right” thing to do. But the knowledge of his own fallibility forced him to pray, even as he acted, “Father, forgive me where I am wrong and where I sin.” His decision cost him his freedom and, eventually, his life. I believe he faced that terrible personal outcome with a sure reliance on the overshadowing grace of God.

As men and women living in a fractured world, we do not have the option to be moral spectators. We must choose and we must act, often without any final certainty that we are totally right. Because our God-given fate is to be creatures of free will and choice, our responsibility in the face of the ethic of the overload is dismaying. Nevertheless, that confrontation is necessary if we are to make any progress toward the goal of being good human beings in a good society. Our choices cannot be made solely on the basis of a rational, mathematical calculation of “the greatest good for the greatest number,” viewed through human eyes. Neither has God supplied us with a moral rule book. We cannot find our answer by referring to page twenty-four, paragraph five, subsection fourteen. To think like Jesus, and then to act upon those thoughts, is a dangerous and difficult task.

I am writing these words during the week just after Easter. In my meditations on the events of Passion Week, I am struck by the profound gap between two of the last sayings of Jesus on the cross. An awful moment comes when Jesus enters into the full despair of the human condition, crying out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Make no mistake; Jesus was not play-acting. His despair was real.) Yet, not long after those terrible words, he faced the final moments of his human existence with calm confidence: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” What filled that awesome gap and gave him strength? Somehow hope and



assurance arose out of despair. It was grace that made the difference, and that grace is still at work in our world.

We cannot command or manipulate grace. Grace “just comes.” What we can do is be open and receptive to its coming. How can we be most open to grace? When we strive within our human limits to be the kind of men and women God wants us to be—when we struggle to be “good”—we are in a prime position to hope for those unexpected visitations of grace. This is not a “religion of works.” All our imperfect works cannot justify us in the sight of God, but genuine faith produces good works, and God’s grace is always waiting to be unveiled.

It does not appear to be our destiny to achieve perfect love here on earth. That culmination awaits the time when we are released from our time-space box and see truth and virtue, not as “in a glass darkly,” but “face to face.” Meanwhile, our task is to take seriously the demands of the moral overload. Relying always on grace, we must dare to act—to do in each concrete moral situation what seems the “most right” thing to do, even as we pray, “Father, forgive me, for I know not what I do.”