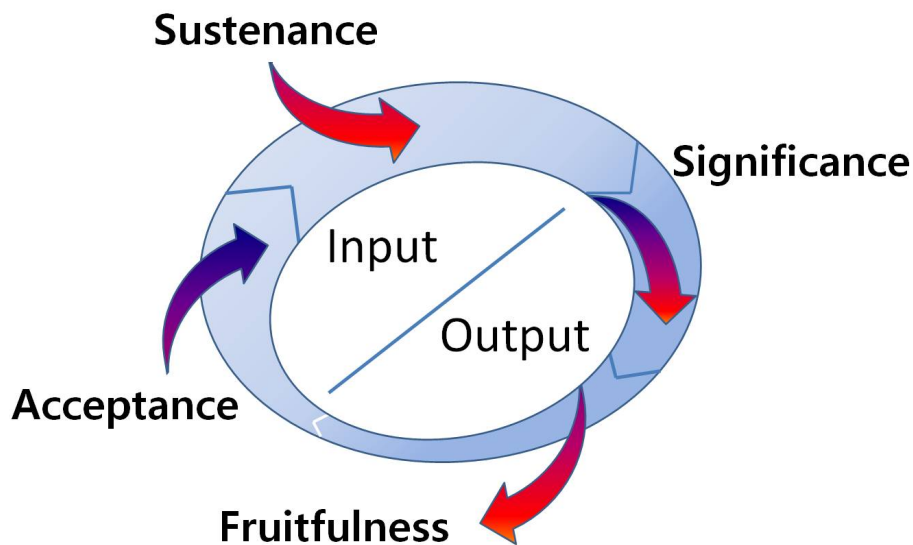


The Cycle of Grace: a Model of Spiritual Growth

This model was devised by Frank Lake and Emile Brunner in the 1960s, out of a concern for missionaries who were 'burning out' on the mission field in India, Lake and Brunner were looking for an answer to the question: how can a life of service for Christ be sustained? For inspiration, they looked to the life and ministry of Jesus and discerned a rhythm or pattern that came to be known as *the Cycle of Grace*. The diagram below illustrates the cycle.



ACCEPTANCE

Mark 1:9-11
Luke 15:11-32

There are four elements to the Cycle of Grace. The first is *acceptance*, beautifully and powerfully revealed in the Baptism of Jesus. As Jesus comes up out of the water, he sees the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like dove, and he hears the Father say, 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.' This happens before Jesus begins his public ministry. He is affirmed as God's beloved Son.

For us too, the Cycle of Grace begins with acceptance. The return of the prodigal son gives us another vivid and beautiful image to help us understand this: the Father embraces his wayward son even before he can say how sorry he is. He is radically accepted, beloved of the Father. Think about how Jesus shows this acceptance to others in his ministry. This is grace: we are loved by the Father and accepted. This is the wellspring or energy of our life and ministry. We understand, of course, from the

rest of the New Testament, that it is on the basis of Christ's sacrifice, his life poured out for us, that we are given this gift.

- ❖ *How have you experienced the love of God? How convinced are you of your acceptance in Christ - that you are beloved of God?*

SUSTENANCE

Mark 1:35-39
Romans 12:9-13

Lake and Brunner saw that Jesus had a range of sustaining practices - ways in which he actively drew upon and gave himself to his relationship with the Father (letting grace flow freely in and through him). These included prayer, a deep knowledge of the Scriptures, and friendship (think particularly of his closeness to James, Peter and John).

- ❖ *Think about other things that Jesus did to be sustained within his relationship with the Father.*

We too need to develop sustaining practices - habits that enable us live out of our acceptance in Christ. We might think of these as ways in which we allow grace to enter and empower our living.

- ❖ *The New Testament letters encourage all kinds of spiritual disciplines: have a look at Romans 12:9-13 for example. How many did you notice? What other disciplines are encouraged in the New Testament?*
- ❖ *What are the things you need to do to sustain your spiritual life (allowing grace to enter and shape your life)?*

SIGNIFICANCE

John 6:35, 8:12, 10:9, 10:11, 11:25, 14:6, 15:1
Romans 12: 3-8

Without doubt, the life of Christ held incredible significance for the whole world. Another way to put this is that Jesus signified (pointed to) God's salvation and His Kingdom. We can hardly compare ourselves with our Lord in this, yet each of our lives holds significance - pointing to something bigger than ourselves. Our lives signify the Kingdom of God - when people meet us and get to know us, they come to see this and touch it.

Our life begins in the soil of acceptance (we are God's beloved) and is sustained (and grows) through sustaining practices. As we grow, we begin to discover our significance in God's Kingdom, which will be unique - for each of us is fashioned uniquely by God. Another way to get at this truth is to talk about 'calling'.

I came across a helpful way to think about this: everyone has

- A song to sing
- A message to deliver
- A special way of being in the World

Coming to understand what our life signifies (our calling) is profoundly releasing, giving direction to our lives.

- ❖ *See Romans 12: 3-8 as a good example of this.*
- ❖ *Take some time in pairs or threes to share what you know about your gifts and your calling as a disciple of Jesus. How is your calling being expressed in your family, your church and in the world?*

FRUITFULNESS

John 15: 1-8

There can be no doubting the fruitfulness of Jesus' life (and death and resurrection). We see grace pouring out of his life to transform all those around him. We see the rejected people accepted. We see the untouchable people embraced. We see the sick healed. We see forgiven lives flourishing. In short, we see the Kingdom of God coming in power. We ourselves, of course, are included in the fruit of Jesus' self-giving.

For us also there is fruit. That is the natural order of things. A life rooted in love, nourished in life-giving disciplines and lived purposefully (calling) will bring forth fruit. This will include our characters and the impact of our lives on others.

- ❖ *How has God changed you? How has he worked through you? What fruit do you hope and long for?*

THE CYCLE OF WORKS

Having explained the cycle of grace, Lake and Brunner do something rather arresting. They reverse it - or rather, show how it might be attempted in reverse, starting with fruitfulness (or achievement) and then moving in the wrong direction around the cycle. So a person might seek to attain certain goals or ambitions, believing that their significance rests in doing so, and that such achievements will somehow sustain them and even gain the love of others. This is *the Cycle of works*. Arguably this reversed cycle exposes what most people are doing - trying to find significance and worth in their work, possessions, achievements, or even in relationships (a successful marriage, etc.). The radical truth of the Gospel is that we only find significance and worth in the acceptance of the Father - in being the beloved.

- ❖ *Do you think the insight offered here is true? Can you see the attempt to the reverse the cycle in your own life? Can you see it in the lives of the people you*

know?

- ❖ *Time to get into some life-giving confession and prayer for forgiveness and renewal. This is probably best done in twos and threes. Pray for the people you know too - bringing them by name to the Lord, calling out for their salvation, that they might know how they are loved and be set free.*

RESOURCES TO TAKE IT FURTHER:

There is a book by Trevor Hudson and Jerry P. Haas, entitled *The Cycle of Grace: Living in Sacred Balance*, as well some short videos that can be easily accessed on *Youtube*. These have the following titles:

Cycle of Grace 1: Acceptance

Cycle of Grace 2: Sustenance

Cycle of Grace 3: Significance

Cycle of Grace 4: Fruitfulness

Cycle of Grace 5: A Grace-filled way to live

These are no more than 15 minutes each and could be profitably used by small groups.

SPIRITUAL CONVERSATION – SOME PROMPTS

Talk about your experience of being loved by God. Are there any blocks for you?

What practices sustain you in your relationship with God? How might you strengthen these?

Talk about your gifts and your sense of calling (your unique way of being in the world/what make you feel alive).

Who are you investing in and who is investing in you?

What fruit is God cultivating in you and through you?

What are you and God working on at present?

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