

## AMAZING GRACE

One of the most beloved hymns in Christendom was written by John Newton, a converted slave-boat captain. And it is quite likely that he got the title of his song “Amazing Grace” from a book written by John Bunyan. The evidence for this attribution is part of an interesting (if not “amazing”) historical sequence.

Bunyan, the author of the widely acclaimed allegory, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, wrote another book that was almost as popular in his day, entitled *The Holy War*. In it there appeared this statement: “*Again I say to thee, O Mansoul, consider if it be not amazing grace that Shaddai (God) should so humble himself as he doth.*” The writings of Bunyan were so largely read in that time that there can be little doubt that Newton came in contact with this book.

Now, John Bunyan, before he became a Baptist minister, confessed that the most influential book leading to his conversion was Martin Luther’s *Commentary on Galatians*. In his autobiography, *Grace Abounding*, he wrote: “*Well, after many such longings in my mind, the God in whose hands are all our days and ways, did cast into my hand one day a book of Martin Luther’s; it was his Comment on the Galatians. It also was so old that it was ready to fall piece from piece, if I did but turn it over. Now I was pleased much that such an old book had fallen into my hands, the which when I had but a little way perused I found my condition in his experience so largely and profoundly handled, as if his book had been written out of my heart. This made me marvel, for thus thought I: this man could not know any thing of the state of Christians now, but must needs write and speak the experience of former days. Besides, he doth most gravely also in that book debate of the rise of these temptations, namely, blasphemy, desperation, and the like; showing that the law of Moses, as well as the devil, death, and hell, hath a very great hand therein, the which at first was very strange to me; but considering and watching, I found it so indeed. But of particulars here I intend nothing, only this methinks I must let fall before all men: I do prefer this book of Martin Luther upon the Galatians, excepting the Holy Bible, before all the books that ever I have seen, as most fit for a wounded conscience.*”\*

Now, in that book so esteemed by Bunyan, Luther had expounded a passage in Gal. 1:15, where the Apostle Paul said that God “*called me by His grace,*” and the great Reformer paraphrased it: “*I was called to such inestimable grace.*”\*\* This was probably the source that Bunyan had in mind when he used the term “amazing grace.” (The translator of Luther’s Latin text may have even used the word “amazing” instead of its synonym “inestimable” in Bunyan’s text.)

If this is a true sequence, then the continuity of this gospel truth of the wonderful grace and mercy of God has thus carried through the ages from one writer to another. It began with Paul (d. 67 A.D.) and was next voiced by Luther (1483-1546). Then Bunyan (1628-1688) picked up the theme, and finally it was to bless the world in glorious melody when it was set to music by Newton (1725-1807). I do not know if anyone else has traced this history of attributions, but it appears to be a logical sequence and a marvelous linking of great souls in Christendom, all united in their humble reverence for the free gift of salvation.

Richard L. Atkins, 5-1-97

\**Grace Abounding To The Chief Of Sinners* by John Bunyan, Baker Book House, 1978, pp.52-53

\*\**Commentary On Galatians* by Martin Luther, Kregel Publications, 1979