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The Meaning of Grace

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Christianity has been rightly called the religion of Grace. When Dr. Otto wanted to emphasize the similarity between Christianity and the *bhakti* movement in Hinduism, he called the latter India's religion of grace. Our understanding of grace will colour our view of religion as a whole, and of the work of Christ in particular. The interpretation of grace has varied considerably in the history of the Church, but it is possible to distinguish two almost antithetical lines of thought and various attempts to find some mediating position between them.

OPPOSING VIEWS OF GRACE

The first of these we may call the Augustinian-Calvinistic view of grace. Luther may be included in this group, but not Paul, as these later exponents of Paul seem to have failed to grasp and present the wholeness of the Pauline presentation of the Gospel. They get their conclusions by logical deduction from some of Paul's statements. The 'twice-born' character of these men has been given as an explanation of this emphasis which may be summarized, using Dr. Moffatt's words, 'all is of grace'.¹ While the influence of conversion experience is not to be underrated, it would be foolish to assume that the 'once-born' type can justifiably have another theology. The truth that all is of grace is strongly emphasized in the New Testament as a whole and especially in Pauline writings. From this follow various conclusions: that God chooses man—election; that election is not conditioned by human goodness—not by works, but by faith; that good works are a consequence of forgiveness and a new fellowship rather than their cause. In Augustine's thought, no good work is possible apart from God, that is (by interpretation) apart from the grace of Christ given in baptism, and hence the virtues of the pagans are only splendid vices. He sees two kinds of grace, one in predestination to baptism and membership in the Church in this life; the other in predestination to salvation in the life to come, sealed by the gift of power for persevering unto the end. Human will is incapable of resisting the will of God; grace

¹ James Moffatt, *Grace in the New Testament*, p. 131.

is irresistible. Men have become pawns in a great game and God is the only player.

Augustine did not trust logic enough to draw explicitly the implied conclusion of double predestination, as was done by Calvin. For the bishop of Hippo all theology flowed from the one supreme principle of the universal and absolute sovereignty of God. It was left undecided whether God predestined his elect without regard to the history of mankind and decreed the fall so that there might be a *massa damnata* from which they could be picked or whether He foreknew the fall and then resolved to deliver certain favoured individuals out of the mass of perdition. Calvin, disliking loose ends and uncertainties in his system, chose the latter alternative.

The opposite of this position is the type of thought that has been associated since early days with the name of Pelagius. Pelagius was obviously a 'once-born' man, of unquestionable morals, and his inner experience coloured his thinking. Pelagianism has been called a heresy and Augustinianism and Calvinism were considered orthodox, and so Pelagius probably did not get a fair deal. With this type of thought we may associate Socrates' idea that knowledge is virtue and that it is only ignorance that causes man to do what is wrong, the more recent deistic ideas of a God who was removed from the world, and the liberal hope that education will solve all human problems. That *avidya* is at the root of all trouble is a common view in Hindu religious thinking too. Here man's freedom and responsibility were taken seriously and Kant's dictum that 'ought' implies 'can' was assumed. Man was responsible for what he made of himself, and could do what he wanted. To be saved one had to be worthy of salvation, and it was in man's power to become so worthy. Only, it is rather difficult to see why, when one is already worthy to be saved, there should be any more salvation. Pelagius and his companions may have been logically right, but they did not take into account the whole of experience and Scripture.

A WAY OF COMPROMISE

Between these two were various groups and schools which tried to hold on both to divine sovereignty and to human freedom, by limiting both in some way. The name *sunergism* may be given to this type of thought even though the term itself seems to have been used only at a much later time. John Cassian, a contemporary of Augustine and Pelagius, called a semi-Pelagian but who should more rightly be called a semi-Augustinian, and Arminius of post-Reformation period and Wesley have been grouped together as representing this point of view. Here divine foreknowledge was pressed into service to solve the dilemma of divine election and the call to good works, both of which are found in the Scriptures. It was assumed that God in foreknowledge predestined those who would be good for salvation.

As divine foreknowledge cannot be wrong, being divine, and cannot fail, being coupled with omnipotence, logically we are still in difficulty as human freedom would only be apparent. But it was denied that God's foreknowledge in any way affected man's choices. Milton puts into the mouth of the Almighty these words:

‘They themselves decreed
Their own revolt, not I. If I foreknew,
Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault,
Which had no less proved certain, unforeknown.’¹

We should give credit to the sunergists for their deep-seated aversion to two theories, which though logically more satisfying, offended their sense of the justice and goodness of God on the one hand and the sense of human responsibility on the other. They valiantly tried to find a way out, a way of compromise, in some way limiting both divine sovereignty and human freedom.

Here we are brought face to face with the basic problem in understanding the meaning of grace. To deny the sovereign freedom and authority of God is to make Him less than God. To make salvation depend in any sense on human merit is to make void the cross of Christ, is against the highest experience of those whom we consider to have walked closest to God, and will in the end throw us into the pit of despair. To analyse and codify the commandment of love into a number of ordinances that can be fulfilled with some energy still left to do some acts of supererogation is to fail to understand the meaning of grace and love completely. To affirm God's sovereignty and power in such terms as to make man a pawn in the divine game makes him an automaton, and there does not seem to be much point in saving an automaton at such cost to God Himself. While the best teachers of the sovereign grace and freedom of God were men of great piety and self-discipline, it cannot be forgotten that the quality of their lives was in many ways in spite of their theology and not the logical consequence of it. And some of their followers quoted the Scriptures and their teaching in defence of loose living.² Antinomianism becomes legitimate, giving man the freedom not to strive as striving is useless.³

¹ *Paradise Lost*, II, p. 116.

² See Reinhold Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man*, III, p. 116.

³ Considering these opposites and attempts at compromise, one is reminded of a letter written long before ‘dialectical’ theology became popular. Charles Simeon, a Cambridge preacher, wrote at the beginning of the nineteenth century:

“The truth is not in the middle, and not in one extreme but in both extremes . . . Here are two extremes . . . Calvinism and Arminianism (for you need not be told how long Calvin and Arminius lived before St. Paul). “How do you move in reference to these, Paul? In a golden mean?” “No.” “To one extreme?” “No.” “How then?” “To both extremes; today I am a strong Calvinist, tomorrow a strong Arminian.” “Well, well, Paul, I see thou art beside thyself; go to Aristotle and learn the golden mean.” But I am unfortunate; I formerly read Aristotle and

PAUL'S INTERPRETATION OF GRACE

It is not pleasant for logical minds to live with an unsolved contradiction, but the fulness of the Biblical presentation of the redemptive activity of God makes it impossible for us to reduce it to a logically perfect system. As Moffatt puts it, 'When the apostle (Paul) sought to transmit "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ", which had dawned upon himself outside Damascus, his good news may be described as a message or proclamation announcing that "All is of grace, and grace is for all".'¹

If Moffatt's summary of Paul's message is justifiable, the doctrine of double predestination, supposedly deduced from Paul's idea of the sovereign freedom of God is inadmissible. Along with this another point must be raised, the place that Paul gives to human decision and action. The whole evangelistic venture of the early church with its call 'repent', is based on it. The great ethical sections of Pauline epistles and a good many other passages in the New Testament bear witness to this emphasis. Serving our purpose even more closely are some passages where the tension of the two aspects, the divine and the human, is stated.

'... Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling ; for God is at work in you, both to will and work for his good pleasure.'² 'This statement,' Niebuhr writes, 'of the relation of divine grace to human freedom and responsibility does more justice to the complex facts involved than either purely deterministic or purely moralistic interpretations of conversion.'³ He also calls attention to Revelation 3:20, 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.'

It is impossible to fit what the New Testament has to say on the relations of man and God into a theology that aspires to be an exact science like logic or mathematics, using words as if they were identical with the truths for which they stand. Paradoxical combinations of indicative and imperative like 'If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit,'⁴ and 'If then you have been raised up with Christ, seek the things that are above . . . ,'⁵ ought to warn us that we cannot move according to laws of formal logic

liked him very much ; I have since read Paul and caught some strange notions, oscillating (not vacillating) from pole to pole. Sometimes I am a high Calvinist, at other times a low Arminian, so that if extremes please you, I am your man ; only remember, it is not one extreme that we are to go to, but to *both* extremes . . . We shall be ready (in the estimation of the world and of moderate Christians) to go to Bedlam together.'

Quoted by C. E. Padwick, *Henry Martyn*, p. 68.

¹ Moffatt, *ibid.*

² Phil. 2:12-13.

³ Niebuhr, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

⁴ Gal. 5:25.

⁵ Col. 3:1.

here. In this realm words are not containers of truth. They should not be used to narrow down and limit ideas, but rather to suggest and point to them. This may be the reason why religious poetry and music and liturgical forms last longer than theologies. This is not an excuse for laziness in thinking, but a warning that we must be aware of the limitations of our thought. Thomas Aquinas's classification or division of the various kinds of grace may be a brilliant piece of analysis, but it is extremely difficult to see the religious value of it, when religion is viewed as a relation between two personal beings. The analysis may be true, as true as the scientific analysis and statements about the wave lengths and volume of different notes in a piece of music. This may sound irreverent, but who calculates the different kinds of love between two friends, or better, between husband and wife?

Even the distinction that is sometimes made between grace as power and grace as pardon seems to be inadequate, unsatisfactory and misleading, as it divides one activity of God into two. The grace that predestines man, controls the world, and works all things together for the good of them that love God is not different from the grace that brings pardon. God's power over man is not different from God's power in man that transforms him.

BIBLICAL VIEW OF GRACE : THREE ASPECTS

Looking at the meaning of grace from the Biblical point of view we seem to have to comprehend together three aspects of it, not two: that all is of grace; that grace is for all; and then man must do his utmost. The whole of the Augustinian tradition is built upon an almost exclusive emphasis on the first of these. The experience of conversion did not leave in Paul, Augustine or Luther any trust in their own worthiness to be saved. For them, in a sense, conversion is in spite of themselves. It was irresistible. For Paul, it was the good pleasure of God that caused the revelation of His Son in him. It is not necessary to dwell more on this point as it is familiar in theology, except to say that this is true not only for the 'twice-born' but also for the 'once-born' who have spent all their lives searching for God. For them too grace is prevenient, and caused and controlled their search.¹ As creator and sustainer, as the One who made us what

¹ There is a story that comes from Islamic sources that illustrates our point, and it is specially telling as it originates in a very different tradition. 'A dervish was tempted by the devil to stop calling on Allah because Allah did not answer, "Here am I". The prophet Khadir appeared to the dervish in a vision with a message from Allah: "Was it not I who summoned thee to my service? Did I not make thee busy with my name? Thy calling "Allah" was my "Here am I".'

'... In that thou seekest thou hast treasure found,
Close with thy question is the answer bound.'

Quoted by G. W. Allport, *The Individual and His Religion*, p. 136.

we are, and as we are, our yearnings and strivings do not have their ultimate origin in ourselves but in Him. Unless He has found us we will not be led to search for Him. The Psalmist's cry,

‘As the heart longs for flowing streams,
so longs my soul for thee, O God,’

is itself a response, not a stimulus.

If all is of grace, it is also true that grace is for all. Strict predestinarians rationalized the problem that all men had not turned to God by the explanation that God predestined some and did not predestine others to salvation. They got away from attributing injustice or partiality to God by the argument that no man deserved anything good at God's hands. But it is not only the fear of making God unjust that causes us to rebel against the doctrine of double predestination. The form that it took in Christian history, condemning all unbaptized children into hell, and the pagan philosophers into the upper reaches of (Dante's) *Inferno*, is partly responsible for this aversion. The primary objection is that it takes away all human freedom, and along with this is the corollary that love, devotion, or fellowship that is not free is not worth anything. If there is any ground for universalism, it must be in the availability of grace for everyone. Destruction or damnation cannot be viewed as a failure on God's part, and we cannot see this happening except by a deliberate human rejection of God.

The third aspect, which is in some ways a corollary of the second, is that if all is of grace, and grace is for all, then it must be our responsibility to accept it. This must be done with our whole devotion and strength. This must be what Paul means when he says, ‘Work out your own salvation *with fear and trembling*.’ The great decisions that make human lives so different one from another—some finding meaning and value and creative activity in life, others finding life hollow, meaningless and an occasion for destructiveness—must follow from our responsibility. This is not to deny the responsibility of the community for the character of the individual, but in spite of the community each man makes or mars his life.

Much has been made of ‘acceptance’, in modern psycho-therapeutic or pastoral counselling situations, as a necessary element in the work of healing, and also as an instance of what may be called grace in a secular setting. What is not emphasized so often, but is as true, is that the healing process begins only when the patient or the counsellee begins to make his own decisions and act on them. It is in the making of these decisions that the beginning is seen of the growth of a healthy personality in the place of the old one.

It is not easy to state a combination of these three in a logically consistent fashion. In connection with the first of these we have to emphasize the truths that Paul and Augustine and

others after them have tried to establish by the doctrine of prevenient grace. Not only the 'twice-born', but the 'once-born' as well must realize that ultimately all comes from God and he is what he is because of grace. No place is left for man to boast before God or to *claim* salvation from Him.¹

In creation and sustenance, in the call to a meaningful life, in the admission to a fellowship in Christ and in the gift of forgiveness to which we can lay no claim, in putting deep desires and hungers in us that are satisfied by nothing less than God Himself, His grace is prior to anything that we can do. Here the experience not only of Jeremiah and Paul, but also of many others less known, would bear witness to the prevenience of grace.

IS GRACE FOR ALL ?

The Church on the whole has not been too willing to accept the truth that grace is for all. Experience is obviously against it when we think of the many for whom the purposes of God in human life mean little or nothing. We recognize that God causes His sun to shine and rain to fall on good and evil alike, but we ascribe that to the regularities of nature and the amoral character of the physical universe. The feeling that Isaiah expresses, that the end of the prophetic activity is to make the heart of this people fat, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed,² is not unreasonable in view of the actual results of his work. Mark puts the same idea into the mouth of Jesus when he suggests that the purpose of the parables was to keep the people from understanding.³ There seems to be also the fear that if it is asserted that grace is for all, the moral incentive may disappear from life. Paul too faced this danger when his critics interpreted his teaching to imply that we are to continue in sin that grace may abound.⁴

While the need of striving and self-discipline (*askesis*) has not been on the whole forgotten by the church, this aspect of Christian life has not been integrated with the rest of theology sufficiently in the past. Textbooks on the Atonement seldom make reference to aspects of religious life like the sacraments and devotional exercises, in and through which the meaning of being one with God in will and purpose is understood and the transforming power of God experienced. We have to recapture the equilibrium which Paul and the other New Testament writers maintain between the work of God in Christ for man as well as in man.

¹ Cf. Luke 17:10.

² 1 Cor. 4:7; Isa. 6:10.

³ Mark 4:12.

⁴ Rom. 6:1.

GRACE A CREATIVE RELATIONSHIP

To conclude: How are we to think and speak of grace? We pray that grace may be given us. In this we follow good tradition, and the words may be too precious to be abandoned, but it must be realized that they have the drawback of leading us to think of grace as something that is given and received, as a *spiritual substance*. This misunderstanding is often seen in the interpretation of sacraments as visible and external vehicles of internal and invisible grace. It would seem that attempts to identify grace with the Holy Spirit share the same weakness.¹ The true understanding of grace can come only as we see it as a relationship where a creative transformation takes place rather than as a gift that can be given or received. Here it is in no way to be differentiated from the Divine outgoing love. It is also the same as the self-revelation of God wherein He gives not information about Himself, but Himself in a redemptive relationship. We think of grace, of revelation, and of love separately, and write books about them separately, because our eyes see so little at a time, and our minds can comprehend so little at a time. We think of justification and sanctification as different, one being a legal and the other a moral process, forgetting that in God who does both, there is no difference between legality and morality. When people think of God's grace and justice as tending in opposite directions they are reading into God contradictions that have a place only in our limited and perverted thinking and experience. The redemptive grace of God is not different from anything else that God does, for He is always acting redemptively. He created man a free being, and therefore will not coerce him. Man having abused his freedom cannot enter back into the right relationship with God by his own effort. The solution lies in the gracious relationship into which we are called to enter in and through Christ, a relationship in which we are justified and sanctified. Man is made in such a way that significant relationships are the most creative and transforming things in life, and in such the opposition is overcome between the external and the internal, the subjective and the objective. We do not have to think of grace as something that comes into life. Life becomes deeper and creative, finds new sources of energy and new springs of action, and finds its real *telos* in this relationship of grace.

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There is only one problem on which all my existence, peace and my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God. If I find Him, I will find myself and if I find my true self, I will find Him.

THOMAS MERTON

¹ For a persuasive attempt at such identification see N. P. Williams, *The Grace of God*, pp. 110ff.