

SAVING GRACE IS NOT SOMETHING IN A HUMAN BEING

A sentence in the constitution *Sacrosanctum concilium*, from the Second Vatican General Council (1963) reads, "Recalling thus the mysteries of redemption, the Church opens to the faithful the riches of her Lord's powers and merits, so that these mysteries are in some way present for all time, and the faithful are enabled to lay hold upon them and become filled with saving grace." (Emphasis ours) (Neuner and Dupuis, *The Christian Faith*, # 1234).

The idea of grace is something within a human being has a long history, and our contention is that it has done a good deal of damage. The famous LWF signing of the common statement about justification on 31 October and the Australian counterpart on Friday 5 November have come and gone. It should rightly be called a betrayal of genuine Lutheranism. One might also ask why the Lutherans did not raise strenuous objections to this notion, which Roman Catholics affirm every time they say the "Hail Mary", which has the words "full of grace." They are a mistranslation of the angel Gabriel's words to Mary, "You who are highly favoured." Jerome had wrongly translated *gratia plena*, "*full of grace*."

The essential trouble is that once human beings begin to think of God's grace as a divine quality infused into them, and also think of faith as if it were a virtue infused into them by the sacraments, they begin to focus on their own qualities instead of on God's quality of compassion to them in Jesus Christ.

To begin with, when one asks, "What are the synonyms of "grace" in the New Testament?" the answer is a string of important words, "mercy", "love", "compassion", "kindness", "love toward human beings", and "favour." On the face of it, it is illogical to think of these synonyms as infused into the persons to whom they are shown. They remain in the person who expresses them.

So where did the idea come from? Paul used the word, "poured out" in Romans 5: "And hope does not disappoint us, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to us." The context, which discusses justification or reconciliation for sinful human beings for Christ's sake, should make it clear that this is indeed not our love to God, but God's love to us. God has revealed His love to us, and we can say that His love fills our beings, and affects us deeply. We live in a state of grace. However, His undeserved favour to sinful human beings remains in Him. It is not something in us that becomes the basis for God's favourable verdict. Roman Catholic theologians also speak about faith as a virtue, which is, similarly, infused into us, together with love and hope. This kind of thinking occurs in many Roman Catholic writings, and even vitiates John Henry Newman's otherwise fine hymn "Praise to the Holiest in the height." He has a line about "a higher gift than grace." Grace is not a gift, or in a human being. For grace is God's unmerited favour to sinful human beings.

The chief blame for the trouble again goes back to Jerome, one of the famous four fathers of the Western Church. The Greek New Testament had two distinct words, *charis*, which means "grace", and *charisma*, which means "a gracious gift." The second, though given by God, does, in most cases where it is used, refer to something in man. *Charisma* is used in the New Testament seventeen times. Jerome translates three of these by *donum*, "gift", two by "*donatio*", "gift", and one by the untranslated Greek *charisma*. In Romans 5:15 he uses "*donum*", but in the same context, in v. 16, he uses *gratia*. There is really no difficulty here or in Romans 6:23, either, "the *charisma* of God is eternal life."

The trouble comes in a list of other passages where charismatic gifts are mentioned. Jerome used *donatio* in Romans 12:6 and *charismata* in I Cor 12:31. But why not in the other passages that refer to charismatic gifts, 1 Cor 1:7, 12:4; 12:9; 12:28; 12:30; 1 Tm 4: 14, 2 Tm 1:6, and I Pt 4: 10? In all of these he used *gratia*, "*grace*", though Paul was writing about charismatic gifts in human beings.

See what a great difference in meaning emerges if grace, the second of the alternatives (underlined) is understood in each of the following:

1 Cor 1:7 "Therefore you do not lack any charismatic gift / grace as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed."

1 Cor 12:4 "There are different kinds of charismatic gifts / graces, but the same Spirit."

(Surely the plural use of an abstract noun, which could be expected only in the singular, should have prevented this mistranslation. For when abstracts are used in the plural/they are regularly concrete - compare "beauty" and "beauties").

1 Cor 12:9 "To another faith by the same Spirit, to another charismatic gifts / graces of healing by the one Spirit..."

I Cor 12:28 "God has appointed in the church first apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly teachers, then miracles,

then charismatic gifts / graces of healing, helpful deeds, positions of administration, and different kinds of tongues.”

1 Timothy 4: 14 Do not neglect the charismatic gift that is in you / the grace that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy, when the body of elders laid their hands on you.”

2 Timothy 1:6 “For this reason I remind you to rekindle the charismatic gift of God that is in you / the grace of God that is in you/ through the laying on of my hands.”

1Peter 4: 10 You should each serve one another with whatever charismatic gift you have received / whatever grace you have received /, as good managers of the manifold grace of God.”

The difference in meaning in these passages is considerable, and we may rightly trace the beginning of this idea, that the church imparts grace through the sacraments, and that God infuses grace into people, to this basic error in Jerome, about AD 400.

The *KJV* has regularly translated *charisma* by “gift.” However, something like “charismatic gift” would have been more helpful against the modern Charismatics, who also often place their confidence before God in some gift of God in themselves, such as speaking in tongues.

Paul sometimes uses the word “grace” for the great privilege Christ has given him to be his apostle. However, this is a special use of the word, not its regular use.

When we come back to the topic of justification, it should be clear that it is supremely important to make a sharp distinction between God’s unmerited favour and a gracious gift of God in a human being. J T Mueller used very strong language, “All who teach that grace in the sense of infused grace (*gratia infusa*) is either the sole or a concomitant cause of justification inculcate salvation by works and have fallen from grace, Gal. 5:4. In reality, while retaining the Christian terminology, they are teaching the paganistic doctrine of work righteousness.” (*Christian Dogmatics*, page 244.)

The Council of Trent, in Session 6, canon 11, placed a curse on the definition of justifying grace as the gratuitous favour of God, and the exclusion of infused grace and human works of love from grace. “If anyone says that men are justified either by the imputation of Christ’s justice alone, or by the remission of sins alone, excluding grace and charity which is poured into their hearts by the Holy Spirit and inheres in them, or also that the grace which justifies us is only the favour of God, let him be accursed.”

Small errors at the beginning often lead to great, dangerous, soul-destroying errors when they have run their course. The way to fix them in our modern context is not to remove the condemnations of what was wrong that come in the Lutheran Confessions, but to insist that when Paul wrote about the righteousness of God C’ justice” is still misleading as a translation), which God in grace credits to the ungodly through faith, he did not say “both / and” but “not / but.” He excluded the Law and works of love as principles of justification. The other principle, God’s grace, together with its correlative in a human being, faith, remains alone. When there are only two possible principles of justification and salvation, and one set is excluded, the other set remains alone. Only two minus one equals one alone. When Paul wrote that faith “works by love” (Gal 5:6) he did not mean that human works of love constitute what either God’s grace is or what faith is. The whole of the book of Galatians is a rebuttal of such a notion.