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# GRACE AND FORGIVENESS: A Lutheran View in Ecumenical Perspective

*Egil Grislis*

Whoever wants to do theological business with the Lutherans, will sooner or later need to come to terms with a key Lutheran theological insight, summing up the condition of the Christian in the world: *simul iustus et peccator* — justified and sinner at the same time. Now the original intent of the formula was a profound one. In the shape of a paradox it recorded the experience of grace and forgiveness, and hence stressed the reality of justification, and yet, realistically, also noted that the life of the Christian knows the presence of sin and the struggle with it.

While appreciative of this Lutheran formula,<sup>1</sup> I would like to note that formulae tend to share the fate of all theological vocabulary: in due course of time the incisive edges are worn off, and instead of being awakened to greater religious awareness, one is lulled into a comfortable acceptance of cheap grace.<sup>2</sup> Consequently we now often have before us a Christian who is, simultaneously, forgiven, but not forgiving —

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The above research paper was presented on May 21, 1985 at the Graduate Theological Foundation of Notre Dame, Indiana, to the Anglican and Lutheran Doctorate of Ministry program while serving as a Fellow of the Anglican/Lutheran program.

1. Of course, it was not merely a formula, or, as Henri Rondet, S.J., has put it: "Justification by faith was not an academic formula; for Luther, it was a truth of experience". *The Grace of Christ: A Brief History of the Theology of Grace* (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1967), p. 279.
2. Cf. Paul Tillich's dictum: "Every type of material can be shaped by every form as long as the form is genuine, that is, as long as it is an immediate expression of the basic experience out of which the artist lives — in unity with his period as well as in conflict with it. If he fails to use such forms and instead uses forms which have ceased to be expressive, the artist is a formalist irrespective of whether the forms are traditional or revolutionary." *Systematic Theology I* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), pp. 178-179, cf. p. 240.

a frozen, loveless saint. It is with this reality that I would like to deal in the present paper.

## I

On a rarifiedly pure theological level, there is no question at all about the presence of sin in all human life. Edward Schillebeeckx, P.O., has written with his usual insightfulness, "Sin flourishes in the heart of every human being. Human society 'lives in a state of mortal sin' . . . Sin is like a malignant growth which is constantly trying to break down *charis*, gratuitous love."<sup>3</sup>

The depth of the success of the breakdown, to my reading, is very powerfully described by Gordon D. Kaufman, "Usually . . . men are unable to give themselves completely to one finite reality, one dimension of experience, as does, perhaps, a Don Juan or a miser or a Hitler, becoming thereby completely demonic: most men do not find it possible to be idolaters and monotheists simultaneously. Hence they become polytheists, worshiping and serving many gods. One may be a 'good family Man' and at the same time a sharp operator in business, a faithful churchman and a super-patriot and racist. What is meaningful and valuable in one domain of life seems irrelevant elsewhere, so with part of their lives and energies they give themselves to one goal, with another fraction to something else, perhaps inconsistent with the first. In this way they are saved from demonic one-sidedness and fanaticism, but fall instead into a situation where their personalities are threatened with disintegration. Life breaks down into many separate compartments, each with its own little meaning, but unrelated or only tenuously related to the others. This pluralism or polytheism pushed to the extreme results in breakdown of the self into split or multiple personalities, different fragments of the self becoming so enslaved to different gods that they lose contact with and even awareness of each other. Thus, idolatrous polytheism also leads ultimately to the destruction of the effective freedom of the self, to a slavery in which the self no longer is able to decide or act as a unified whole."<sup>4</sup>

In the traditional Lutheran paradox of *simul iustus et peccator* one could discern the Christian hope that the reality of justification will continuously challenge the believer to confront and to overcome the reality of sin in his own life. The paradox then, at best, described an authentic struggle between grace and sin. By contrast, the polytheistic model presented by Gordon D. Kaufman views human existence without any such struggle. Instead there is compromise and coexistence at any price, which in the end leads to the loss of a unified, integrated self, free and responsible in its decision making process. Where the human self is thoroughly compartmentalized, there it comes naturally to accept forgiveness and at the same time to practice the refusal of forgiveness.

What makes the plight of the compartmentalized person (or should we even speak of a multiple personality?) so unenviable, is a further observation by Langdon Gilkey that ordinarily two yardsticks are used when judging ourselves and others, *viz.*, "self-deception about ourselves" and "hostile interpretation of others."<sup>5</sup> He writes, "It is

3. *World and Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1971), p. 25.

4. *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 370.

5. *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language* (Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1969), p. 388.

perfectly evident to all of us that these others do not live up to their ideals. We may see this in our roommate or a professional colleague telling us about his cherished goals. How blindly he interprets himself by his own ideals — as prophet, as servant of the Lord, as merely helping others — and refuses to see the hostility, the ambition, and the self-centredness that so clearly color his every action!”<sup>6</sup>

Yet Langdon Gilkey is not a pessimist. Having measured the depth of ordinary human self deception, he can also suggest that occasionally the truth is seen and publicly acknowledged. But note — this is the exception rather than the rule, “Only in rare confidential moments, filled sometimes with relief, sometimes with despair, lubricated possibly by midnight beers, does he admit this other side either to us or to himself”.<sup>7</sup>

In order that we may not be unfair to Gilkey, it needs to be noted that here he is interpreting the possibility of ultimacy in secular experience. With that we shall resonate on at least two levels. First, to all readers of Martin Luther it is familiar fare that he was prepared to view all human experience as potentially a doorway to deeper reality. This was true for Luther not only in regard to the tribulations — those soul-searching moments of despair which led more directly to the perception of grace — but also in respect to life’s lighter moments of camaraderie and joy. For the latter a classic case-in-point is Luther’s description of the rise of the Reformation: “And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friend Philip [Melanchthon] and [Nicholaus von] Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything.”<sup>8</sup> The conclusion of this quotation leads us to our second point — the Word of God as the decisive means of grace.

In principle, then, theology is able to point to the Word and sacraments (or to the Church which administers the same) as the ever present healing help of the disintegrated humanity that is compartmentalized and anguished. Valid as this principle is, I already noted that it dwells on a rarifiedly pure theological level. Now in the Lutheran tradition it is not customary to scorn publicly the great discipline of theology — regardless of what one may think privately. However, realistically, it is also worth observing what is popularly thought of theology these days. Namely, we should not overlook that even the quotable statements are not very cheerful, at least not in regard to the doctrine of sin. Perhaps you will recall the important book by Karl Menninger, M.D., *Whatever Became of Sin?*, written more than a decade ago. In that study Dr. Menninger wisely notes about sin, “It was a word once in everyone’s mind, but now rarely if ever heard. Does that mean that no sin is involved in all our troubles — sin with an “I” in the middle? Is no one any longer guilty of anything? Guilty

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6. *Ibid.*, p. 386.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 386.

8. Luther’s Works 51:77. Wilhelm Pauck has recognized the in-depth content of this light-heartedly sounding observation: “These words sound quietistic and politically naive, but they were spoken by one who, in the name of God, changed the course of history. What Luther meant to express was that his decisions and actions were motivated only by his concern for the word of God, and not by political calculations and predictions. By, and on account of, his faith, he became a reformer. His work, the Reformation, will live as long as this faith finds a response in the hearts of men.” *From Luther to Tillich: The Reformers and Their Heirs* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1984), p. 9.

perhaps of a sin that could be repented and repaired or atoned for? Is it only that someone may be stupid or sick or criminal — or asleep? Wrong things are being done, we know; tares are being sown in the wheat field at night. But is no one responsible, no one answerable for these acts? Anxiety and depression we all acknowledge, and even vague guilt feelings; but has no one committed any sins? Where, indeed, did sin go? What became of it?”<sup>9</sup>

The question, in Dr. Menninger’s mind, is a very important one. Quite obviously he does not merely want to ask it alone. He also wants us to ask the same question with him. Therefore Dr. Menninger repeats, pointedly and ever so seriously, “The very word “sin”, which seems to have disappeared, was a proud word. It was once a strong word, an ominous and serious word. It described a central point in every civilized human being’s life plan and life style. But the word went away. It has almost disappeared — the word, along with the notion. Why? Doesn’t anyone sin anymore? Doesn’t anyone believe in sin?”<sup>10</sup>

There is a prophetic tone to Dr. Menninger’s question, because it was being asked during the latter part of the war in Vietnam. And Dr. Menninger had the information on hand by which he could indict the superficiality, the shallowness, the sin-denying of his countrymen. Namely, he quoted from the editorial of *The New Yorker*, dated September 23, 1972, which, so he thought, “conveyed this feeling of moral decline”, “A Harris poll published last week showed that fifty-five percent of the American people are in favor of our bombing Vietnam. Thirty-two percent are against it. The others do not know what they think. In short, it appears that the majority of the people in our country believe it is right, or necessary, for us to go on killing the Vietnamese people — North Vietnamese and South Vietnamese alike — because, according to the poll, ‘It is important that South Vietnam not fall into the control of the Communists’.

“No matter that Russia and China, giants among nations, long ago fell into the control of the Communists, and that it is now our government’s policy not only to coexist with Russia and China but to attempt to establish friendly relations with them. What matters is not to let this tiny, once obscure semi-nation become Communist. So, in a stupor, with scarcely a thought, we drop our thousands of pounds of explosives every day, and wipe out those nameless, faceless, distant creatures who in our bleary minds are not quite human beings.

“And it is not our President who is doing the killing, it is not our bomber crews, it is we the American people. We are the ones — the fifty-five percent who say yes and the rest who say so little — who keep the bombs falling.”<sup>11</sup>

Of course, the Vietnam war was so long ago. But has any great change occurred since then? On May 5, 1985, late in the afternoon, I spent several hours driving and listened to a Canadian radio show, nation-wide, inquiring what Canadians thought about President Reagan’s visit to that German cemetery in Bitburg. Was it an appropriate act of reconciliation, expressing forgiveness — or was it a political blunder? The responses were extraordinary — literate, thoughtful, passionate. And the large

9. New York: Hawthorn Books, 1973, p. 13.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 15.



majority made it very clear that they did not want any forgiveness whatever. Then the thought occurred to me that forgiveness is possible only where the whole notion of sin — one's own and that of other people — is taken seriously. Sin and forgiveness are the two sides of the same Christian coin.

Having been told long ago that politics is the art of the possible, I do not presume to know whether President Reagan should have travelled to the cemetery in Bitburg. I only underscore that in the Christian faith where the reality of sin is acknowledged, the possibility of forgiveness is authentic. That, realistically, we would not succeed in forgiving all the time, is clear enough. But in a Christian perspective every inability to forgive should bring about a real measure of anguish. The chance to forgive should be seen as an opportunity for grace. The very inability to forgive should be recognized as an occasion that reveals the need to pray for grace. Forgiven but not forgiving is not a paradox, if it is accepted as a patriotic truism. The true *simul iustus et peccator* demands that the vision of justification shed some light on the darkness of sin — and never leave it casually alone.

## II

The age of the Reformation sought to underscore the vital significance of grace by speaking about *sola gratia*. Thereby it did not mean to proclaim a lonely solitude of grace, but to accent its uniquely redemptive role. However paradoxical the human situation, the daily confrontation between grace and sin was not seen as ever an even match.<sup>12</sup> As is well known in our ecumenical age, the celebration of grace has always been central in the Christian faith; it was certainly not re-discovered during the Reformation. Yet it may very well be that each generation must discover and re-discover some facets of the larger perspective with a clarity that is characteristically its own.

In turning to the medieval church, two examples will have to suffice. The eloquent preacher and the winsome friend, St. Augustine, in writing theology recorded his own success at evangelization and membership drives in eloquently subdued tones, "When, therefore, the gospel is preached, some believe, some believe not; but they who believe at the voice of the preacher from without, hear the Father from within, and learn; while they who do not believe, hear outwardly, but inwardly do not hear nor learn; — that is to say, to the former it is given to believe; to the latter it is not given. Because "no man", says He, "cometh to me, except the Father which sent me draw him". (John 6:44)."<sup>13</sup>

We shall note that this is not a full explanation of the profound mystery of divine

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12. Philip J. Hefner has formulated this insight with admirable clarity: "In the Reformation formula the terms *justus* and *peccator* are not of the same value. As Romans 6-8, Philippians 3, and Colossians 3 testify, the *peccator* is described through the eyes of the *justus*. It may be adequate psychological description to assert that the despair of sin is present every moment as a concomitant to justification. It may be proper sociological and historical description to assert that man's hands are always dirty, continually marring the new creation which Christ has brought. Theologically, however, it must be said that the very concept of *peccator* is dependent upon a prior awareness of the concrete actuality of redemption, and that the phrase *simul justus ac peccator* is itself meaningful only in a community which celebrates and marvels at the fact that is existence has been recreated quite beyond any reasonable expectations, *sola gratia*." *The Scope of Grace: Essays in Honor of Joseph Sittler* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), p. 197.
  13. St. Augustine, "On the Predestination of the Saints", ch. 15, *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1956), 5:506.

predestination. This is only a quick glimpse, observing that the hermeneutical role of predestination is liberating for the successful proclaimer of the Gospel as it brackets his prideful self esteem; similarly, in unsuccessful experiences the trust in God's ultimate initiative, while not freeing us from trying, can liberate us from feeling unduly guilty for all such compartmentalized lives that have not received redemptive unification. In any case, it is St. Augustine's way of brushing aside the perennially prideful question: "How well am I going?" The attention is directed from self to God. Hence emerges the insight of gratitude and joy, "Faith, then, as well in its beginning as in its completion, is God's gift . . ."14

Consciously relying on Apostle Paul ("By grace ye are saved through faith; and this not of yourselves; but it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8)) St. Augustine establishes grace as the foundation of faith and again underscores its gratuitous nature, "Grace, however, is not bestowed according to men's deserts; otherwise grace would be no longer grace (Rom. 9:6). For grace is so designated because it is given gratuitously [gratis]."

Without seeking to belittle St. Augustine's exegetical prowess, and without denying his dependence on St. Paul, it may nevertheless be in order to appreciate the personal and experiential side of St. Augustine's statement. The discovery that faith is possible, or that grace is stronger than sin, plays a decisive role in his theological reflections — not to mention his personal life as well.

In attesting to the same discovery, St. Thomas Aquinas masterfully locates the presence of sin in the disoriented human self. Among his several definitions of the effects of sin, we also find the following, ". . . human nature is more corrupt by sin in regard to the desire for good, than in regard to the knowledge of truth."15

Or, stated more amply, ". . . in the state of perfect nature man referred the love of himself and of all other things to the love of God as to its end; and thus he loved God more than himself and above all things. But in the state of corrupt nature man falls short of this in the appetite of his rational will, which, unless it is cured by God's grace, follows its private good, on account of the corruption of nature."16

Now from this condition a human being can only be liberated by God. Quite specifically, St. Thomas Aquinas is even prepared to inquire "Whether a Man, by Himself and without the External Aid of Grace, Can Prepare Himself for Grace?" The response, of course, is a flat no, though stated at appropriate length and containing the following key insight, ". . . we must presuppose a gratuitous gift of God, Who moves the soul inwardly or inspires the good wish."17

Clearly, St. Thomas Aquinas did not doubt the generosity of God. There is a deeply felt and clearly stated sense of divine victory that permeates his writings. If the word "triumphalism" did not have such a bad reputation these days, I would be inclined to use it with rejoicing. With an omnipotent and benevolent God in heaven, why should not the affairs of the church and its saints on earth appear to be in perfectly safe pro-

14. *Ibid.*, ch. 16, NPNF 5:506; "On the Predestination of the Saints", ch. 12, NPNF 5:504; "On Grace and Free Will," ch. 43, NPNF 5:463.

15. *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q 109, art. 2, reply obj. 3 (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1947), 1:1125.

16. *Ibid.*, art. 3, 1:1125.

17. *Ibid.*, art. 6, 1:1127.

vidential hands and therefore worth celebrating with unqualified joy?!

Put in another way, whenever facing the power of sin and fretting over the resources of grace in one's own existence, the children of the Reformation have been most often tempted to turn directly to the rich resources within their own denominational heritage. As I value this direction, I shall also turn to it very shortly, but not before I have made the ecumenically necessary point: the reality and the doctrine of grace has flourished long before the Reformation! The principle that grace can overcome sin has been very well established ever since the days of the Early Church. And while precedent does not free us from existential struggle in our own lives, it does reassure that many men and women of all generations have found the grace of God sufficient for their lives. Of course, I am not speaking here of cheap grace which is always ineffective.

The beginnings of the Reformation, however, may very well be sketched as the tragic failure to obtain authentic grace and the great persistence to wrestle with cheap grace. Perhaps the complex story can be outlined by observing that the medieval Christian encountered grace in a "progressive transformation".<sup>18</sup> The going on to true sainthood provided the framework for Christian existence; sanctification appeared to be a safe route to eternal life. What had been corporately supplied from within the bosom of the holy Catholic Church and safely channeled through the seven sacraments, started to appear questionable at the dawn of a new age — during the Northern Renaissance in the 16th century Europe. The scholars speak so clearly about Luther's terrified conscience. They note that Luther all of a sudden seeks personal assurance, and fails to find it within the traditional sacramental system. Luther asks again and again: "How do I find a gracious God?"

If the question is repeated in faithful adherence to Luther's verbiage, we may fail to find it relevant. A meeting of the Lutheran World Federation, held in Helsinki, Finland, astutely noted that the contemporary concern is about the "meaning of life."<sup>19</sup> And so it is — with resources that enable modern man to find coherence and strength, and one's true self in the presence of God. By temperament and conviction Luther did not see himself as a candidate for sainthood. He could document no "progressive transformation" within his own soul.<sup>20</sup> And so he worried whether he was at all among the saved — as we must worry at times whether in our own life there are resources to affirm the meaning of life, the value of morality, the reality of eternity, the true existence of a Saviour called Jesus Christ.

The technical term for Luther's saving insight has been "forensic justification".<sup>21</sup> While certainly it is a declaratory act of God whereby the sinner is declared just, it is not a mere declaration contrary to fact; rather, an authentic "renewal of life" is thereby taking place. The inner dynamic of this even needs some special attention. In

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18. H. George Anderson, T. Austin Murphy, Joseph A. Burgess, eds., *Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), p. 24; cf. Without denying the possibility of growth in Christian piety, Karl Rahner, S.J. has pointed out that traditional Catholic theology has been exceedingly careful in not clearly delineating the various steps of progress, c.f. "Reflections on the Problem of the Gradual Ascent to Christian Perfection", *Theological Investigations, III*, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), pp. 3-23.

19. *Justification by Faith*, p. 46

20. *Ibid.*, p. 50

21. *Ibid.*, p. 237



Luther's earlier writings, e.g. the *Commentary on Romans*, he states very clearly that the sinner needs to bow before God in authentic humility.<sup>22</sup> Only as a penitent who has no hope in his own performance and goodness may he hope in the mercy of God. *On the Bondage of the Will* radicalizes this approach. Instead of the more placid humility we now encounter creative despair<sup>23</sup> — the readiness to be damned, the acknowledgement that one deserves only the wrath of God. Now it is through this profound submission (which finds its echoes in Calvin's celebration of damnation for the glory of God)<sup>24</sup> that the sinner comes to experience the miracle of justification. Subjectively, the sinner acknowledges complete inability to resist sin. Aware of the higher obligation of forgiveness, one finds no resources within oneself to forgive — and admits this fact. Centuries later the members of the Alcoholics Anonymous will similarly confess the inability to resist the desire for alcohol — and in the confession of the inability will discover the strength to remain sober for the day.

Luther's own wrestling with God had been stormy and anguish filled. Moments of utter despair have left their imprint on Luther's formulation. For those whose religious experiences have taken place if not in a lower key then at least with less anguish, Philip Melancthon's gentle formulation may seem more appropriate. So sweetly, "grace . . . denominates forgiveness of sins and gracious acceptance by God".<sup>25</sup> And this "acceptance" also brings about a "change in man."<sup>26</sup> In a lengthier passage Melancthon puts it this way, "This faith, which receives the promise, says that God wants to forgive us our sins for the sake of the Lord Christ. It is a reliance on the Lord *Christ*, and it effects peace, as all true Christians know. It is not untrue to say that the Lord Christ himself effects this peace, or that the Holy Spirit does. God is present in this comfort. He is active, however, through the external word, and kindles faith in the heart. But these are all together — the external word, contemplation of the external words in us, and the Son of God, who works through the external word, manifests the eternal Father, speaks comfort to the heart, and gives the Holy Spirit, which produces love and joy in God."<sup>27</sup>

The basic model which is employed by Luther and Melancthon, however, is one and the same — it is the scripturally familiar encounter between God and His children. The strength of this approach is the psychodynamic insight that honesty in personal diagnosis is the necessary step toward healing. Hence the Christian in this perspective is not merely challenged to recount and analyze, but sincerely to confess one's sins. At the same time, the realistic accent on the presence of sin in Christian life expresses no passive acceptance of sin, but rather an active struggle with sin. In the very confession of human inability to cope with sin, the believer recognizes the

22. "the only complete righteousness is humility", LW 25:441.

23. LW 33:190. Cf. Egil Grisliis, "Martin Luther's View of the Hidden God: The Problem of *Deus Absconditus* in Luther's Treatise *De Servo Arbitrio*, *McCormick Quarterly* (Nov. 1967) 21, 1: 81-94.

24. Cf. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by Jon T. McNeill, Library of Christian Classics, 21 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) 3:22:11, p. 947; 3:24:14, p. 981.

25. *Melancthon On Christian Doctrine: Loci Communes 1555*, trans. and ed. Clyde L. Manschreck (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 153.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 154.

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 158-159.

avenue to a gracious God who can and does overcome sin.

The emphasis on forensic justification does not exclude a doctrine of sanctification. As Lutheran interpreters have claimed on numerous occasions, Luther and his followers do not recognize and value the role of sanctification.<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, the decisive model for Lutherans remains that of simultaneity.<sup>29</sup> However, in these ecumenical days it is not unusual to find authentic Lutheran appreciation of the transformationist model as well. Thereby a bridge is built not only to the medieval past, but also to the ecumenical present.

What in Lutheranism can be shown with great effort, in Anglicanism had been accomplished with clarity from the very beginning of serious theologizing. Thus Richard Hooker (1554-1600) celebrates the power of grace on two levels and makes use of both models of simultaneity *and* transformation. He distinguishes between "two kinds of Christian righteousness."<sup>30</sup> One of them, justification, is "perfect, but not inherent" and outside us, hence ours "by imputation". The other, sanctification, "inherent, but not perfect" and "in us".<sup>31</sup> In other words, alongside the relational model of acceptance and forensic justification, Hooker also constructs a transformationalist model. Here the believers are viewed as "temples of the Holy Ghost".<sup>32</sup> Always active, the Holy Spirit brings forth what "the Apostle doth call the fruits, the works, the operations of the Spirit." But since the Bible describes this new existence in terms of the presence of Christ in the believer as well, Hooker follows and records: "The cause of life spiritual in us, is Christ, not carnally or corporally inhabiting, but dwelling in the soul of man . . ." <sup>33</sup> Finally, Hooker can even describe the process of sanctification as consisting in the growth of "faith, hope, charity, and other Christian virtues".<sup>34</sup> The common denominator, however, is always the same God: "God giveth us both the one justice and the other: the one by accepting us for righteousness in Christ; the other by working Christian righteousness in us."<sup>35</sup>

Let there be no doubt about it: although the doctrine of grace can be described with the help of abstract models, the theological formulations of St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther and St. Richard Hooker are no mere constructs of the theological mind. They are religious reflections upon the experienced reality of

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28. Egil Grisliis, "Luther on Sanctification: Humility and Courage", *Consensus: A Canadian Journal of Theology* (January 1984) 3-16

29. For Roman Catholic appreciation of this perspective, cf. Karl Rahner, S.J., "Justified and Sinner at the Same Time", *Theological Investigations*, VI, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), pp. 218-230.

30. *The Works of Mr. Richard Hooker*, ed. by John Keble, 7th ed. rev. by R.W. Church and F. Paget (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1888), Sermon II,21, 3:507; cf. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Faith and Works: Cranmer and Hooker on Justification* (Wilton, CT.: Morehouse-Barlow Co., Inc. 1982).

31. *The Works of Mr. Richard Hooker*, 11,3, 3:485 and II,21, 3:507.

32. *Ibid.*, II,21, 3:507.

33. *Ibid.*, II,26, 3:516.

34. *Ibid.*, II,21, 3:507.

35. *Ibid.*, II,21, 3:507.

the immense mercy and power of God through Jesus Christ. They are eloquent witnesses to the fact that in Christian life sin has lost its decisive power.

### III

The celebration of the power of grace, however, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer has pointed out in the case of Luther, runs the danger of trivialization, of cheapening, even of destroying — if one preserves merely the formulae and neglects the authentic meaning, “Luther had said that grace alone can save; his followers took up his doctrine and repeated it word for word. But they left out its invariable corollary, the obligation of discipleship.”<sup>36</sup>

Consequently, explains Bonhoeffer, “The justification of the sinner in the world degenerated into the justification of sin and the world . . . Costly grace was turned in to cheap grace without discipleship . . .”<sup>37</sup>

Misunderstood in this way, instead of empowering the Christian for service, it merely served to excuse his sin, “I can go and sin as much as I like, and rely on this grace to forgive me, for after all the world is justified in principle by grace. I can therefore cling to my bourgeois secular existence, and remain as I was before, but with the added assurance that the grace of God will cover me. It is under the influence of this kind of “grace” that the world has been made “Christian”, but at the cost of secularizing the Christian religion as never before . . . The upshot of it all is that my only duty as a Christian is to leave the world for an hour or so on a Sunday morning and go to church to be assured that my sins are all forgiven. I need no longer to follow Christ, for cheap grace, the bitterest foe of discipleship, which true discipleship must loathe and detest, has freed me from that.”<sup>38</sup>

This analysis is probably the best known and most often quoted portion of Bonhoeffer’s thinking about grace. His constructive suggestions need not be any less profound, but they certainly are demanding, and possibly for that reason they have not received the same amount of popular attention. Namely, while acknowledging the uniquely redemptive value of Christ’s atonement, Bonhoeffer nevertheless believes that authentic discipleship also involves vicarious suffering, “. . . the Christian also has to undergo temptation, he too has to bear the sins of others; he too must bear their shame and be driven like a scapegoat from the gate of the city.”<sup>39</sup>

Of course, Bonhoeffer is writing in generalities, projecting abstract possibilities without the benefit of concrete illustrations just how this suffering would come about. That is the strength of his approach, namely the insistence that unflinching loyalty to

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36. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*. Revised ed. (New York: Macmillan Publ. Co., 1963), p. 53;

Of course, this was not the result of mere oversight of wilful change. Paul Tillich has rightly observed: “. . . since Luther’s presupposition — the late medieval situation — no longer existed, the repetition of Luther’s experience became increasingly impossible, and the doctrine of justification, which represents a breaking-through of every law, became a law itself as unrealizable as the laws of the Catholic church.” *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 133.

37. Bonhoeffer, p. 53.

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

Christ will bring authentic disciples in conflict with any society anywhere. But the most remarkable insights now only follow. First Bonhoeffer reassures that the disciple will receive the unfailing help of Christ. Then, secondly, Bonhoeffer underscores the particular weighty task to which this assistance of Christ will lead the Christian, “The passion of Christ strengthens him to overcome the sins of others by forgiving them.

...”<sup>40</sup>

Bonhoeffer calls our attention to the challenge offered by Apostle Paul: “Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2). Then, with an exegetical introduction, follows Bonhoeffer’s main point, “As Christ bears our burdens, so ought we to bear the burdens of our fellow-men. The law of Christ, which it is our duty to fulfil, is the bearing of the cross. My brother’s burden which I must bear is not only his outward lot, his natural characteristics and gifts, but quite literally his sin. And the only way to bear that sin is by forgiving it in the power of the cross of Christ in which I now share. Thus the call to follow Christ always means a call to share the work of forgiving men their sins. Forgiveness is the Christlike suffering which it is the Christian’s duty to bear.”<sup>41</sup>

To be sure, the readiness to live Christian forgiveness through personal suffering and the bearing of one’s cross, does not mean that one must do it silently. It is the task of the church to preach forgiveness as well as repentance — the Gospel as well as the Law. And as Bonhoeffer perceives the complexities of life, there can be circumstances where forgiveness may not be extended. Bonhoeffer notes, “If the Church refuses to face the stern reality of sin, it will gain no credence when it talks of forgiveness. Such a Church sins against its sacred trust and walks unworthily of the gospel. It is an unholy Church, squandering the precious treasure of the Lord’s forgiveness. Nor is it enough simply to deplore in general terms that the sinfulness of man infects even his good works. It is necessary to point out concrete sins, and to punish and condemn them.”<sup>42</sup>

In other words, Forgiveness does not exclude a realistic assessment of sin and guilt. Forgiveness does not deny the facts of history or try to soften the harsh lines of contemporary reality. Forgiveness does not sentimentally forget the horror of every human holocaust or hunt for platitudes when confronting economic and social need. But within the perspective of forgiveness, it is the joy of the cross to make the first step toward reconciliation — at times the most excruciating step, as indeed it may turn out to be one’s last step as well. I think that this is what John 3:16 is seeking to communicate, and what Apostle Paul so powerfully attests in Romans: “while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (5:8).

Of course, Christian forgiveness is not a handy method which will assure statistical-measurable success. Crucifixion may very well turn out to be the immediate result. Nevertheless, within the entire Christian understanding of forgiveness there is embedded the power of grace — of costly grace, as Bonhoeffer liked to call it. Forgiveness, in its essence, is the experience of the power of God’s infinite love. Hence forgiveness also participates in the divine miracle of resurrection. Miraculous-

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40. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 324.



ly, new life does grow out of the reality of forgiveness.

By the same token, wherever we encounter forgiveness that is unforgiving, we have not met an authentic paradox (like simultaneously justified and a sinner), but just an artificial construct (like a square circle) which is an impossibility. “Forgiven but not forgiving”, “loved but not loving”, “accepted but not accepting”, “understood but not understanding”, “trusted but not trusting”, “believed but not believing”, as well as many more similar exhibits of cheap grace do at times give grace a bad name. But the true reality of grace, nevertheless, remains victorious and unblemished, because it is the power of God’s love which cannot fail.

At the conclusion of his famed Sermon IV, Richard Hooker stated this faith with unsurpassed clarity and power, “. . . because we are in danger like chased birds, like doves that seek and cannot see the resting holes that are right before them, therefore our Saviour giveth his disciples these encouragements beforehand, that fear might never so amaze them, but that always they might remember, that whatsoever evils at any time did beset them, to him they should still repair, for comfort, counsel, and succour. For their assurance whereof his ‘peace he gave them, his peace he left unto them . . .’

“This peace God the Father grant, for his Son’s sake; unto whom, with the Holy Ghost, three Persons, one eternal and everliving God, be all honour, glory, and praise, now and for ever. Amen.”<sup>43</sup>

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43. Hooker, pp. 652-653.