



## Healing the Human Community: Grace as Reconciliation

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In a sermon entitled "Salvation," Paul Tillich declares, "the word salvation is derived from the Latin word 'salvus' which means heal or whole."<sup>1</sup> That being the case, the entire Bible can be read as a record of the healing acts of God. In both the Old and New Testaments there are numerous accounts of persons being healed, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The biblical writers clearly understood the meaning of "holistic" health and healing. But the biblical story of healing also involves communities and human relationships. In reality, this is the center of the biblical message. Salvation is the making whole of the fractured community. It is the coming of the Kingdom of God, the New Jerusalem. To be fully whole, persons must live in a whole community. Beyond this, the Bible makes it evident that ultimately healing extends to the entire creation. Someday our suffering world will be remade into a "new heaven and a new earth." Healing becomes a universal event. In this article, however, I want to focus upon the second area where God's healing is experienced, that of making whole the human community. I want to do this by discussing the concept of "grace as reconciliation."

Before beginning my treatment of the topic, let me indicate that the concept of grace is obviously complex. It affects all areas of Christian life and experience. The concept itself has its own history of meanings and interpretations, most of which cannot be dealt with in the confines of a single essay. This essay will be limited to a consideration of the effects of the doctrine of grace relative to the theme of reconciliation. It will also be limited to a brief treatment of two major doctrines of grace: that of Thomism as a representative of the Roman Catholic tradition, and that of Martin Luther as a representative of the Protestant tradition. As I shall attempt to indicate, each tradition has embodied elements which are destructive of human community, and yet each tradition also contains elements which offer possibilities of healing for our fractured community. Finally, I shall investigate a number of recent works which are attempts to reinterpret the idea of grace and attempt to show that there exists the possibility of

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<sup>1</sup>Paul Tillich, "Salvation," *The Eternal Now* (New York: Scribner's, 1963) 113.

combining the best aspects of both the Roman Catholic and Protestant ideas of grace in such a way as to emphasize fully the meaning of grace as reconciliation.

### I. THE THOMISTIC CONCEPTION OF GRACE

All commentators are agreed that for Thomas Aquinas grace is substantial. The fundamental human problem is that our nature is not sufficient for achieving the supernatural end for which we were intended. Grace, then, becomes that which fulfills or elevates human nature so

that it might achieve its supernatural destiny. In Thomas' own words, "Grace, in itself, perfects the soul's essence, since it is a certain participated likeness of the divine nature."<sup>2</sup> Grace accomplishes this elevation of the human soul through its infusion into the human soul as a habit. As Roger Haight indicates, "Since a habit is a specific principle of operation, grace is conceived of as the new nature, the higher principle of activity to a supernatural end."<sup>3</sup> What is apparent from this very brief description is that even though grace is a gift from God, nevertheless, once it is given, it becomes a possession of the person so gifted. The very nature of the person visited by God's grace is radically transformed. Most immediately apparent, then, relative to the problem of reconciliation is that, so understood, grace does actually elevate the life and character of the person who has experienced grace. The gifted person is, from an ontological, as well as moral perspective, of a higher order than the person who does not live in grace. The Thomistic framework inescapably establishes barriers between persons since it divides humankind into two distinct classes of persons one of which is, indeed, superior to the other. This divisive tendency in Thomistic thought is further enhanced by the concept of merit which is part of the Thomistic system. George Forell is certainly correct when he declares that "Aquinas denied the possibility that man could reach this blessedness unaided by Divine grace." Nevertheless, as Forell goes on to indicate, Aquinas "considered ethics the result of cooperation between Divine grace and human merit."<sup>4</sup> Because grace has infused a new "habitus" into the person, the person now has a center of activity from which truly moral action can proceed. This allows for the possibility of growth in merit and can lead eventually to the moral and spiritual perfection of the person. The Thomistic conception of merit allows for development of levels of perfection which are, at least partially, dependent upon, and reflective of, the worth of the individual character. Not only, then, does the Thomistic idea of grace distinguish between those who live in grace and those who do not, it also allows for levels of distinction among those who live in grace. This hierarchical classification of moral worth is most clearly symbolized in the radical divide between the presumed morality of the priesthood and that of the laity. The priesthood is required to live according to the counsels of perfection which are not binding on the laity and which are understood to be a prerequisite for, and an expression of, the higher ethical quality of life of the clergy.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Summa of Theology*, q. 62, a. 2, c; from *An Aquinas Reader*, ed. Mary T. Clark (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972) 485.

<sup>3</sup>Roger Haight, *The Experience and Language of Grace* (New York: Paulist, 1979) 60.

<sup>4</sup>George Forell, *Faith Active in Love: An Investigation of the Principles Underlying Luther's Social Ethics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1962) 73.

Finally, the Thomistic doctrine of grace contributes to the development of separated classes of persons since the emphasis on growth in perfection through the merit of human works has a tendency to focus the attention of the actor on the merit of the act rather than on the concrete situation of the recipient of that act. The problem here, of course, is a perennial one, a problem that must be combated by every person and every institution. Nevertheless, it is certain that the Thomistic doctrine of grace is highly susceptible to the kind of distortion which Karl Holl attributes to it. Says Holl of the church's attitude prior to the Reformation, "Almsgiving thus became a good work in virtue of 'good intention,' that is, in reference to the giver's own

salvation. What effect the gift has on the recipient, whether it is helpful or perhaps harmful, was completely disregarded in the moral evaluation.”<sup>5</sup> The Thomistic idea of grace seems to inescapably focus attention on the doer of the deed and does, in fact, indicate that a good deed actually enhances the moral value of the doer. Each good deed, rather than becoming an opportunity for the reconciliation of persons, can actually enhance their degree of separation; for in theory, each good deed enhances the moral superiority of the already morally superior person while leaving the status of the inferior party unaffected. In the structures of the Catholic Church, the end result of such a doctrine was the establishment of monastic orders charged with developing the perfection of the monastics through the continual performance of acts of charity and self-sacrifice. The unintended consequence was the emergence of a whole social class whose only function in society was to be the recipients of this monastic charity.

Having criticized some aspects of the Thomistic doctrine of grace, we must now indicate that there are several important ideas relative to the concept of grace which point to a more universally encompassing and liberating theory of grace. The first important aspect relates to the refusal of Aquinas to limit God’s grace solely to the direct interaction of God with the individual believer. God’s grace is embodied in creation, particularly in the natural law and in human reason which is able to discern that law. From a Thomistic perspective, God’s grace is everywhere apparent and through the use of reason all persons can, even unknowingly, participate in God’s grace. The theory of natural law means that all persons participate in the goodness of creation and all are capable of moral action consistent with God’s purposes. All persons, whether Christian or non-Christian, retain a degree of goodness and can be a reminder to others of God’s intentions for creation. In theory, at least, no persons are completely lacking in moral value, and so the moral insights of all persons must be taken seriously.

A second important aspect relative to the Thomistic doctrine of grace is the idea that grace is communicated sacramentally. The sacraments are the means by which God’s grace is made available for the community of believers. As such, each individual is dependent both upon God and upon the community for his or her reception of God’s grace. God communicates love in and through the community. Grace is always mediated. Each person, then, has a functional dependence upon every other person. Grace is never a solitary event, but is always, even if only indirectly, the activity of the whole community.

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<sup>5</sup>Karl Holl, *The Reconstruction of Morality* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979) 125.

## II. LUTHER’S CONCEPTION OF GRACE

Luther, of course, radically reformulated both Christian theology and Christian ethics by his reinterpretation of the experience of grace. Grace was no longer understood in terms of substance, in terms of “habitus”; but rather grace was now understood in terms of relationship. As Gerhard Ebeling observes, for Luther “grace does not alter something within man, but alters his situation.”<sup>6</sup> The changed situation is a change in the God-human relationship. God is no longer encountered as a wrathful, judgmental power, but rather, in the words of Paul Althaus, “God now fully confronts man entirely as the self-giving love he really is.”<sup>7</sup> By reformulating grace according to the analogy of personal relationships, Luther gives radical emphasis to the gracious quality of grace. Grace is no longer a gift that can be accepted and then possessed by the recipient. Rather, as in any relationship, living in grace is always dependent upon the freely

willed commitment of the other party in the relationship. This constant reference to the inescapable dependence of the believer upon God's freely given love removes a major barrier between persons since we can no longer consider ourselves to be the owner of a special grace or "habitus."

This reconception of grace in terms of relationship thus has a major effect upon the understanding of human character. Grace as relationship does not substantially alter the character of the believer. While in the Thomistic schema the infusion of grace elevates character and may be seen as initiating a process of character development, according to Luther's idea of grace, the actual nature of human character remains fundamentally unchanged. The believer is still both "righteous and sinner." Justification is merely the other side of the changed relationship between God and the person. Just as the person now views God as loving and trustworthy rather than as judgmental and destructive, so now, in Luther's words, God views the believer as "truthful and righteous for the sake of our faith."<sup>8</sup> For the believer this means there is no cause for pride; we have not become better persons. All that has altered is God's perception of us, and so like all other persons we remain sinners in our actual being.

Finally, Luther's relational concept of grace destroys all possibility of merit. Since we remain sinners, since our basic character is unaltered, since grace is solely dependent upon God's continued relationship with us, our works can have no inherent value in and of themselves. As Luther indicates, "So the Christian who is consecrated by faith does good works, but the works do not make him holier or more Christian, for that is the work of faith alone."<sup>9</sup> There can, then, be no levels of perfection, no gradations of moral worth. Either one is in right relationship or one is not. And, as in all relationships, one's being in a right relationship is primarily a function of internal attitudes, of freely willed faith and love, and not primarily a function of external acts. Rather, our external acts are a product of our inferiority, of our fundamental faith and orientation. For Luther this radical reconception of grace meant that persons were now truly

<sup>6</sup>Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972) 156.

<sup>7</sup>Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972) 10.

<sup>8</sup>Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," *Three Treatises* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960) 285.

free to serve the neighbor. Freed from the worry about their own righteousness, liberated from the struggle to attain spiritual and moral perfection, Christians could now see the concrete neighbor and respond to that neighbor's actual needs.

Luther's reconception of grace thus destroys many of the motivations and temptations of the Thomistic system which led to the elevation of some persons and the denigration of others. Luther's idea of grace had a leveling effect, for as Karl Holl indicates, Luther consistently and consciously rejected the idea of the "descending gradation of the concept of the good which the Scholastics had derived."<sup>10</sup> This leveling finds its concrete expression in the proclaimed "priesthood of all believers." There are no longer categories of persons and separate ethical precepts for each category. Now all persons are priests. The same demands are made upon all and the same requirements exacted from each. All Christians have equal worth, their stations are now a matter of function rather than virtue. Even the term "saint" is given a new meaning. Saints are no longer persons of special spiritual or moral value; rather, every believer is a saint. To be a believer is to be as great as the greatest saint; to be a saint is to be as sinful as the most humble

believer. Luther thus totally obliterates the hierarchical ranking of virtue which is so prominent in Thomistic thought. Nevertheless, Luther also dismantles many of the positive elements in the Thomistic doctrine of grace and so permits the development of a Protestant doctrine of grace which, in its own way, is also destructive of human community.

The first negative aspect of Luther's doctrine of grace is related to Luther's positing of an overly spiritualized God-human relationship as the most significant point of contact between God and persons. In order to emphasize the importance of the faith relationship, Luther largely rejects the idea of a more fundamental grace which pervades all of the structures of the world and of human existence. Human reason is now understood to be radically distorted by sin, and human laws are not so much a reflection of the natural law and so guides which help persons achieve their natural end as they are checks on human sinfulness. Civil law now has no real positive function but rather functions to restrain the destructive, anarchic impulses of humankind which constantly threaten to destroy all possibilities for human community. According to Luther's categories there is no longer any category of "natural goodness." As Karl Holl indicates, "In opposition to the Scholastics, Luther refused to recognize as moral in any sense the still lower level of action, the deed without any reference to God, the morality without religion."<sup>11</sup> While Luther has eliminated the levels of perfection which inhere in the Thomistic concept of grace, he has introduced an unbridgeable chasm between the Christian and the non-Christian, between believers and non-believers. In Thomistic thought the non-believer retained a degree of natural goodness and could indirectly participate in God's grace and so retained the ability to exhibit a degree of moral worth. In Luther's thought this is no longer a possibility. Since all moral worth is dependent upon one's direct relationship to God, a God conceived entirely in Christian categories, the

<sup>9</sup>Luther, "Freedom of a Christian," 297.

<sup>10</sup>Holl, *Reconstruction of Morality*, 74.

<sup>11</sup>Holl, *Reconstruction of Morality*, 75.

non-Christian can have no moral worth or value, nor can any of the actions of non-Christians. In Luther's own words, "If a man were not first a believer and a Christian, all his works would amount to nothing and would be truly wicked and damnable sins."<sup>12</sup> In the words of Paul Althaus, for Luther, "[Works] must be theologically as well as ethically correct."<sup>13</sup>

Luther has reinstated a distinction between persons which produces a new division in the human community that eventually comes to dominate the attitudes of Western European peoples in their relationships with the non-Christian world. In Luther's dichotomy, only the acts of Christians, of persons living in faith, have moral value, and only these persons have moral worth. Luther, himself, puts all non-Christians into a separate and distinct category. All these persons belong to the kingdom of the world, a kingdom doomed to eventual damnation. Christians are superior to "those of the world," sharing a special relationship to God that non-Christians do not have. It is important to notice that Luther's bitter attacks upon institutions and persons, members of the civil order or of the Roman magisterium, always begin by removing the Christian status of these persons or institutions. The Pope becomes anti-Christ, the Prince becomes the agent of the devil, and the worth of these persons need no longer be recognized. Once these persons are placed in a category of moral and spiritual worthlessness, they need no

longer be accorded the respect due to other members of the faith. Luther's admonition to "slay, stab, and murder" rebelling peasants, and his proclamation that such butchery is a Christian obligation, is no aberration of a great man's thought; it does not grow out of an irrational fear of anarchy.<sup>14</sup> Luther had previously declared the rebelling peasants to be non-Christians in both their motivations and actions. He had removed their moral and spiritual value as a class of persons, and so now true Christians, operating from their position of greater moral and spiritual insight, were free to exterminate unrepentant peasants. It is only a short step from Luther's position on the issue of the peasant rebellion to the justification of the enslavement of non-Christian peoples, the slaughter of heathen savages, or the nuclear annihilation of atheistic, communistic countries.

Luther's understanding of the experience of grace, however, also had a more subtle effect on the destruction of human community. As Paul Tillich indicates, Luther not only dismantled the moral hierarchy of the Scholastic conception of faith; Luther also dismantled the sacramental character of the church.<sup>15</sup> As previously indicated, the Thomistic formulation of the sacramental character of grace created a dependence of believers on the community of faith. Others actually became a source of God's grace since all believers both contributed to, and partook of, the sacramental quality of the church. Persons found that God's grace was experienced in their interaction with one another and in their communal affirmation of life and faith. For Luther, grace is not mediated; it is a direct presence of God dependent solely upon the private relationship of the be-

<sup>12</sup>Luther, "Freedom of a Christian," 297.

<sup>13</sup>Althaus, *Ethics of Martin Luther*, 8.

<sup>14</sup>Martin Luther, "Admonition to Peace: A Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants of Swabia," and "Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants," *Luther: Selected Political Writings*, ed. J. M. Porter (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974).

<sup>15</sup>Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968) 237.

liever to God. In such a framework, others can contribute nothing to our spiritual worth and value. Both other persons and the community are extraneous to our fundamental relationship with God. As such, both other persons and the community are unimportant as regards the dynamics of faith. We saw that in the Thomistic doctrine of grace there was a danger that concern for merit and perfection might tempt the religious person to overlook the real needs of the neighbor. In Luther's reconception of grace, there is the danger that the neighbor's intrinsic value will be overlooked since the neighbor is understood as making no real contribution to the Christian's own life of faith or salvation. Luther's doctrine of grace thus contributes to the development of a radical religious individualism which makes concern over one's personal relationship to God more important than the concern for building human community.

### III. TRADITION AND INTERPRETATION: AN EXPANDED CONCEPT OF GRACE

A significant problem for Christian faith is, then, reconceptualizing the experience of grace so that it witnesses to God's activity of making whole the human community. Such a reconstruction of grace is underway in a number of quarters, including mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic theology as well as in the newer theologies of liberation. Important contributions to this reformulation have recently been made by persons as disparate as Harold

Ditmanson, Joseph Sittler, Karl Rahner, Luis Segundo, Roger Haight, and Leonardo Boff. It would not be correct to say that there is an emerging consensus as to how the experience of grace might be reconceived; it is fair to say, however, that there is a convergence of themes that can be extrapolated from these contemporary theologians for the purpose of reformulating our understanding of the experience of grace. This new understanding of grace includes important elements from both the Thomistic and Reformation traditions as well as certain expanded concepts of grace which grow out of a desire to be open and responsive to the changing social situation of which we are a part. In this last part of the paper I shall try to gather some of these elements into a doctrine of grace which is, from my perspective, a satisfactory interpretation of this fundamental religious experience.

#### A. *Grace as Relational*

First, we need to affirm with the Reformation tradition that grace is best understood in relational rather than substantial categories. As Leonardo Boff indicates, “Grace is not just God, not just the human being. It is the encounter of the two, each giving of self and opening up to the other.”<sup>16</sup> In stressing the relational nature of grace we avoid the temptation of regarding grace as a possession, as something which actually elevates our own human character. If grace is relationship, then it can always be lost, for the other to whom we are related is always free to terminate the relationship. Emphasizing grace as relationship makes us conscious of our radical dependence upon God and of the truly “gifted” nature of the relationship within which we exist. However, we must expand the Protestant idea of grace and emphasize more fully the universal

<sup>16</sup>Leonardo Boff, *Liberating Grace* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979) 17.

character of God’s grace. God has not established a relationship with only a select few believers, but rather, as Luis Segundo observes, grace “is the atmosphere surrounding the existence of all. In its ontological ground human life is suffused and supported by the goodness and love of God, who creates and moves every thing.”<sup>17</sup> In this reaffirmation and extension of the idea of the universality of grace which is certainly latent in the Thomistic doctrine of the natural law, Christians can see that their position in the world is in no way unique. As Athanasius early stated, “Through the Incarnation the Son turned all creation into children of God and thus leads it, as such to the Father.”<sup>18</sup> This idea of the universality of grace plays a predominant role in Karl Rahner’s concept of “anonymous” or “implicit” Christianity which allows viewing non-Christians, in the words of Harold Ditmanson, “not as evil or stupid,” but (quoting Rahner) as persons “who in the depths of their being are already pardoned, or can be pardoned, by God’s infinite grace in virtue of his universal salvific will.”<sup>19</sup> From this perspective Christians lose all moral and spiritual superiority and stand united with all persons as recipients of God’s love and grace.

#### B. *Grace and the Persistence of Sin*

Second, the reformulation of the doctrine of grace must retain the idea that grace does not substantially affect or perfect our character, but leaves us both righteous and sinner. Our self-conscious acceptance of God’s grace may make us more conscious of our sinfulness, but it never removes it. Again, such a formulation prevents us from assuming the superiority of our morals or

motives. The acknowledgement of our continued participation in sin, however, must include the awareness that our sinful nature remains not only because of our finitude, but also because we are inescapably social beings. The idea of our corporate selfhood has not yet been fully incorporated into Christian theology or ethics. As Harold Ditmanson recognizes, however, “man is inescapably social, and this means not only that he needs society, but that he is formed and exists in a matrix of social relations.”<sup>20</sup> This reminds us that all persons are formed by and participate in the social structures which organize our social existence. Persons remain sinful both because they are shaped by sinful social structures and also because their actions contribute both directly and indirectly to the injustices of the social system of which they are a part. If, as Leonardo Boff contends, “the social, political, and economic structure is not external to beings” but “pervades them to the very core,”<sup>21</sup> then we are radically and inescapably enmeshed in both the goodness and the evil of our social structures. Our moral and spiritual development is limited by other members of our social order, and it also limits them. The Pauline conception of the organic unity of all believers in which all rejoice and suffer together receives a new and extended application.

<sup>17</sup>Juan Luis Segundo, *Grace and the Human Condition* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1973) 109.

<sup>18</sup>Segundo, *Grace and the Human Condition*, 191.

<sup>19</sup>Harold H. Ditmanson, *Grace in Experience and Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977) 21.

<sup>20</sup>Ditmanson, *Grace in Experience and Theology*, 114.

<sup>21</sup>Boff, *Liberating Grace*, 14.

### *C. A Sacramental Understanding of Grace*

The third element which must be included in our understanding of the experience of grace pertains to the Thomistic idea of the sacramental transmission of grace but expands the limits of what constitutes a sacrament. As we saw, the difficulty with Luther’s view of grace was that Luther understood grace as largely unmediated; grace is communicated directly in the relationship between the individual and God. This has the effect of devaluing the world, human social structures, and the neighbor, for none of these can contribute to the essential life of the believer. A reformulation of the concept of grace must include the observation of Leonardo Boff that:

we must never separate reflection on grace from reflection on the world. Grace is always given in mediations, negotiations, relations, and social structures. We can never talk about grace in itself because it shows up in this particular thing or that particular thing.<sup>22</sup>

A sacramental understanding of grace, when put in this expanded context, means that other persons, humanizing social structures, and the beauty of nature are all graceful presentations of God’s loving concern for us. As expressions of grace, other persons can never be devalued for they, themselves, are both recipients and mediators of God’s grace. Again, to quote Leonardo Boff, “Each [person] must be a sacrament of salvation for the other. Herein lies the deepest meaning of love for neighbor, which is to embrace even our enemy. Grace and salvation entail universal solidarity.”<sup>23</sup> Retaining the sacramental quality of grace prohibits any essential division among persons, for all of us are dependent upon the other and each can have sacramental presence for the other.



#### IV. GRACE AS GOD'S RECONCILING ACTIVITY

These preceding elements, when joined together, can contribute to our understanding of grace as God's reconciling activity. This reconciliation, however, extends beyond the traditional emphasis of reconciliation being primarily the reestablishment of the broken relationship between God and the individual. Now we experience grace in a way described by Harold Ditmanson:

Within human experience, the aim of grace is to bring about the kingdom of God, a universal community in which the love revealed in Christ seeks the fulfillment of all things in such a relationship to one another that what flows from the life of each enriches the life of them all.<sup>24</sup>

Grace becomes healing, the healing of the human community. But as we have seen, such healing can occur only as we view one another as belonging to a community of equals. There can be no healing, no community, when some are

<sup>22</sup>Boff, *Liberating Grace*, 28.

<sup>23</sup>Boff, *Liberating Grace*, 119.

<sup>24</sup>Ditmanson, *Grace in Experience and Theology*, 60.

regarded as having more worth than others; or where some persons are viewed always in the role of "givers" and others always in the role of "recipients." In actual fact, a broadened understanding of grace removes all distinctions between persons. No persons can ever be considered more virtuous. In all interchanges among persons, all persons both give and receive. All persons are recipients of, and potential vehicles for God's grace. To experience truly the grace of God, God's reconciling activity, is thus to be opened to the possibility of new forms of human community. Living out the implications of such an experience is no simple matter. But, having experienced God's grace, we can begin to struggle to live in, and to help build such a community, for as Leonardo Boff so beautifully articulates, "Finally, the grace of God is to be seen in our invincible certainty that we are nurturing a new kind of society more worthy of human beings and God."<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup>Boff, *Liberating Grace*, 86.