

# Perspectives on Grace

by Kerry S. Robichaux

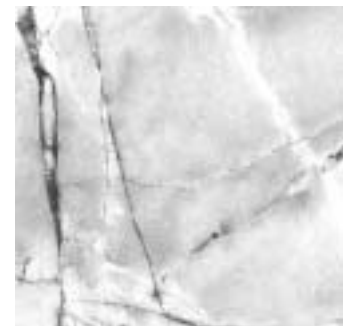
## Introduction

In the New Testament there is perhaps a no more unique and potent notion than that of grace, unique because it seems to arise out of nowhere in the thought and teaching of the apostles and potent because it seems to fully characterize the action of God in relation to humankind. Certainly there is ample evidence of God's grace in the Old Testament, exhibited particularly in His declarations of love for Israel (Deut. 10:15; Isa. 43:4; Jer. 31:3; Mal. 1:2) and in His election of Israel for a covenant with them (Deut. 7:6-9; Psa. 89:3); the concept can be dug out without too much effort even if there is strictly no exact term for it in the Old Testament. But in the New Testament the concept of grace gains central importance, characterizing not only God's actions, which are the full extent of Old Testament grace, but even the actions of His New Testament believers in union with Christ. Grace in the New Testament age is found to be the *modus operandi* of both God and His believers, and in this sense proves to be the most basic descriptor of how God's economy operates in the New Testament period.

And yet, even though the concept is so basic to the Christian understanding of what God does through and in Christ, there is a surprisingly wide spectrum of definitions of what grace is among the various faith traditions within the Christian church. Add to this the variety of conceptions concerning how we may obtain grace, and we find ourselves grappling with one of the greatest points of distinction between Catholic (with Orthodox) and Protestant faith. The distinctions are not completely antithetical, however, particularly as regards the definitions of what grace is; much of the same understanding prevails in all the theologies of grace. The distinctions in the various definitions are primarily ones of emphasis, this school of thought giving greater attention to one aspect of grace, and that school to another. There is, however, greater distinction, in fact, true antithesis, when it comes to the means whereby grace may be obtained by the believers and to the function that grace serves in Christian salvation. Here are the main sources of contention between the faith traditions insofar as grace is concerned.

In this article I intend to review in basic fashion the major doctrines of grace from the three great faith traditions of the Christian church—Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant. My hope in doing so is to underscore the fact that there is much in common among these definitions, even if there is at the same time much in contention concerning the means of grace and the function of grace in salvation. The distinctions regarding the means of grace will be set aside for the sake of ascertaining the commonalities regarding the definition of grace, but some appropriate notice will be taken of

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the various positions regarding the role of grace in rescuing humankind from the fall. In spite of the differences, however, I intend to focus on the commonalities and offer a comprehensive view of grace which, it is hoped, will respect the New Testament presentation of this concept as well as the emphases of the faith traditions of the Christian church. Most of this will serve as a survey and synthesis of the teaching on grace from the Scriptures as held by the church and will come as nothing new to those readers versed in the theologies of the church. However, I will contribute a view concerning grace which, I believe, may help to unify the various sub-notions, the various emphases, in the faith traditions and offers a more powerful definition of grace—a higher definition, as I will call it.

### The Roman Catholic Perspective

We can begin an examination of the Catholic view of grace by consulting the descriptions of grace in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. In most general terms, for the Catholic, grace is “favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, adoptive sons, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life” (1996).<sup>1</sup> This help from God issues from an attitude and disposition in God toward humankind that views its object kindly and without respect to merit or due. The help is certainly directed; however, it is highly intentional and corresponds to God’s higher purpose for humankind, that is, that humanity may enter into God’s family and enjoy His life and nature.

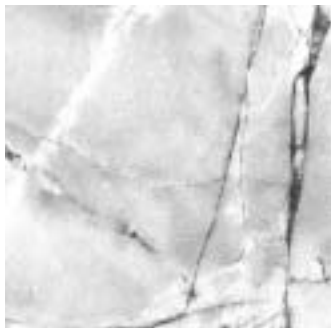
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Catholic teaching more finely divides this general notion into two large manifestations of God’s grace: actual grace and habitual, or sanctifying, grace. Actual graces “refer to God’s interventions, whether at the beginning of conversion or in the course of the work of sanctification”; whereas habitual, sanctifying, grace refers to “the permanent disposition to live and act in keeping with God’s call” (2000). Here a distinction is made between grace as an activity of God toward humankind and grace as a state of being for the believer. The former grace is God’s movement toward humankind, independent of human activity, for the salvation of humankind. It is termed *actual* in the sense that action is taken by God and solely by Him. These salutary acts of God do not persist but disappear as the action completes. This is in contrast to an abiding, habitual grace, which sanctifies the believer and involves his or her cooperation. Sanctifying grace is, in Catholic theology, the more general species of grace since “holiness and the sonship of God depend solely upon the possession” of it (Pohle, “Sanctifying Grace” 06701a.htm). For this reason, it is often referred to simply as *grace*, without qualification or modification.

This distinction between actual and sanctifying grace derives in part from the distinctions in grace made by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* (II, I, Question 111). To a great extent modern Catholic teaching on grace owes its existence to Aquinas, for whom grace was to be initially distinguished as gratuitous or sanctifying. Gratuitous grace is that which a person cooperates with in order to lead others to God in one way or another. This is the grace of the apostles for their ministry and of the common believers for their function in the gospel and in the Body of Christ. Sanctifying grace is that which unites a believer to God and results in Christian virtue for the believer and in his or her ultimate glorification. Aquinas further characterizes sanctifying grace as either operating or cooperating, depending on the involvement of the believer in the grace:

In that effect in which our mind is moved and does not move, but in which God is the sole mover, the operation is attributed to God, and it is with reference to this that we speak of “operating grace.” But in that effect in which our mind both moves and is moved, the operation is not only attributed to God, but also to the soul; and it is with reference to this that we speak of “cooperating grace.” (FS111.html)

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Him, He is said to do so in the way of operating grace. Instances of such grace would be God's moving a person to will to believe in Him. However, once grace operates in the person, he or she begins to act as well, in response to that operation of grace, and now grace does not merely operate in the person but cooperates with him or her for the fulfillment of God's good pleasure. It is not so much a matter of two graces but of two logical effects of the one grace in action: "Operating and cooperating grace are the same grace; but are distinguished by their different effects."<sup>2</sup>

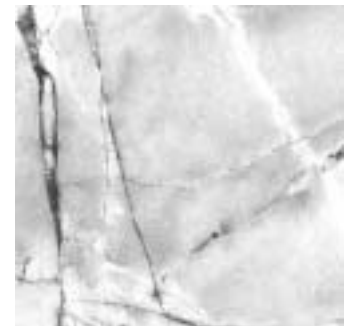
But beyond these subtle distinctions in the types of grace, there are in Catholic thought specific functions of grace, and these capture in finer fashion the Catholic view of grace as it effects salvation. "Grace is first and foremost the gift of the Spirit who justifies and sanctifies us" (2003). The aims of grace are the justification and sanctification of the believers, which, of course, are points of intense controversy between Catholic and Protestant traditions. What is common to both traditions, however, is the simple notion that grace operates toward these ends. But long before justification in its Catholic form occurs, grace is in operation: "The preparation of man for the reception of grace is already a work of grace" (2001). Once a person is led to incline toward God, "the first work of the grace of the Holy Spirit is conversion, effecting justification....Justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man" (1989). (Here is where Protestant theology will take issue, as we will see a little later.) This work of sanctification is also an issue of grace: "Grace is a participation in the life of God" which "introduces us into the intimacy of Trinitarian life" (1997). As a comprehensive statement concerning grace, the *Catechism* defines the grace of Christ as

the gratuitous gift that God makes to us of his own life, infused by the Holy Spirit into our soul to heal it of sin and to sanctify it. It is the sanctifying or deifying grace received in Baptism. It is in us the source of the work of sanctification. (1999)

Catholic theology also recognizes grace as "the gifts that the Spirit grants us to associate us with His work, to enable us to collaborate in the salvation of others and in the growth of the Body of Christ, the church" (2003). These, by the way, correspond to Aquinas's gratuitous graces in that they do not result in the direct sanctification of the believer who is motivated by them, even though they do indeed result in the justification and sanctification of those for whom this ministry of grace operates. The *Catechism* divides grace in this sense into sacramental graces, by which divine help is rendered via the various sacraments of the church, and special graces, or charisms, which "are oriented toward sanctifying grace and are intended for the common good of the Church" (2003). The special graces are best illustrated by the gifts mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12 and are said to be "at the service of charity which builds up the church" (2003). Finally, among the special graces are the so-called graces of state, which "accompany the exercise of the responsibilities of the Christian life and of the ministries within the church" (2004). These are properly the implementations of grace that relate to the offices of the church and are most clearly seen in Romans 12:6-8.

**I**n summary, Roman Catholic theology views grace as the full range of God's gratuitous help to humankind for salvation. It operates to prepare a person for the personal reception of the Spirit, who Himself offers grace to the individual for his or her justification and sanctification. Grace first operates *upon* the will of the believer to bring him or her to the initial gift of the Spirit, that is, to convert him or her; then it cooperates *with* the will of the believer, who can now further experience the gift of grace for justification and sanctification of the soul. This sanctifying grace is an abiding and habitual gift that issues in a stable and supernatural disposition toward participation in the life of Christ, which is infused into the believer through the Holy Spirit and ultimately deifies the believer. Along with the enjoyment of the grace that sanctifies, there is also the participation in the grace that serves the works of gospel, ministry, and building up of the church. These most generally come in the form of the sacraments, which serve as the most common vehicle of

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grace for the believer. But particular gifts of grace are bestowed by the Spirit for the edification of the church. These special graces manifest themselves both in the general exercise of spiritual gifts and in the particular gifts of office in the church.

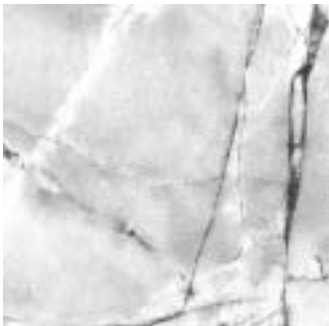
A word should be said about the Catholic notion of justification, since it differs substantially from the Protestant view. Justification in Catholic theology refers more inclusively to the forgiveness of sins, the reception of God's righteousness and the life of divine sonship, and the renovation of the human soul from the stains of both original and personal sins. It is founded upon a faith in the revealed truth concerning the person and work of Christ, but it is faith that requires with it concomitant works of charity, which manifest that indeed the faith is not false. "Only such faith as is active in charity and good works (*fides caritate formata*) can justify man, and this even before the actual reception of baptism or penance, although not without a desire of the sacrament" (Pohle, "Justification" 08573a.htm). In the Catholic view, during the initial stages of justification, grace operates to motivate and enable the believer to "produce works worthy of repentance," which works seal that indeed the faith within is operating. This grace within the believer is said to be infused (1999) and forms the basis for God's acceptance of the believer, as opposed to the Protestant notion that initial, saving grace is outside the believer, in the attitude of God, and solely with respect to the redemptive death of Christ. Justification in Catholic theology also emphasizes the eradication of sin from the human soul, not merely the forensic covering of it, as the Protestant Reformers held. Justification, therefore, results in a state of grace, the habitual, sanctifying grace discussed above, in which the believer is free from sin and active in participation in the life of God. Initially, justification is conferred through the sacrament of baptism, which brings to a close the process of justification in a person; but equally the sacrament of penance restores a person to the state of justification, which has been lost through mortal sin. In contrast, the Protestant Reformers held that justification depends purely on faith in Christ's work of redemption and that no works of any kind are necessary for its effect. Rather, Christ's work on the cross was held to be sufficient cause for justification before God and that hence faith alone justifies (*sola fides justificat*). Initial, saving grace is not infused into the believer, nor need it be, since concomitant works, to be enabled and supplied by grace, are not required for justification. Rather, grace is within God in the justifying process; it is His gracious attitude toward the repenting sinner, based upon the effective death of Christ. Further, the Reformers rejected the notion that justification serves to actually take sin away from the believer. Rather, sin remains but is not imputed to the believer because of Christ's redemptive death on the cross. The state of grace is less a state of actual purity or sanctity and more a state of enablement by which sin can be constantly overcome.

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### The Eastern Orthodox Perspective

In comparison with its Roman Catholic counterpart, the Eastern Orthodox notion of grace distinguishes itself in a number of ways. The most striking difference—and this is even more the case when compared to Protestant thought—is the apparent lack of any attention to a doctrine of grace. Fortunately, there is at least one excellent study, by Nicholas N. Gloubokowsky, that strictly examines the Orthodox formulations concerning grace, and it straightaway observes that "in patristic and particularly in Eastern Greek literature, there are no special researches about this most essential element of Christianity" (62). (It must be understood from the start that almost all aspects of Eastern Orthodox theology derive support from the Greek Fathers of the church, and thus Gloubokowsky's study is just as much an examination of Greek patristic thought as it is of modern Eastern Orthodox thought.) In defense of this seeming indifference, Gloubokowsky surmises that

evidently the Christians of that epoch [of the Greek Fathers] did not feel the necessity of such discussions, and it was certainly so because they were permanently conscious of the



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grace of God existing in them directly and wholly....There was neither necessity nor reason to speak much about this ubiquitous and quite normal phenomenon, as today we are not actively interested in air while our organism is healthy. (62)

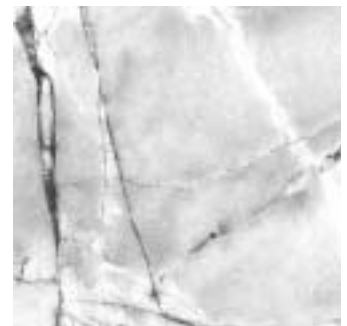
If we are to accept Gloubokowsky's assertion, early Greek patristic Christianity, and by reflection modern Eastern Orthodoxy, so enjoyed the grace of God, and so uniformly enjoyed it, that issues regarding grace never really arose that would have forced systematic research into the matter. As to so full an enjoyment of grace, it is difficult to validate Gloubokowsky's claim. But the history of Eastern Orthodox thought will confirm the fact that the doctrine of grace never gendered controversy to the extent that it did in Western Christianity, and this probably does account for the paucity of formal studies concerning grace in Orthodoxy relative to the extensive Western corpus of materials. On a deeper level, between East and West, particularly the Protestant West, there is a fundamental difference in understanding concerning human nature after the fall, and this entails a substantial difference in understanding regarding grace. We shall see this below, but for now we should notice that historically the East did not take much interest in the major, fifth-century debate between Augustine and Pelagius regarding human nature and divine grace, and the relative importance of each in human salvation. It was this debate that so fired the zeal of the Protestant Reformers eleven hundred years later and provided them a model for their own stance on the sole importance of grace in salvation. The Pelagian controversy and its reassessment during the Protestant Reformation gave Western Christianity ample reason to develop the very full notions of grace that occupy so much of both Catholic and Protestant theological thought today. Orthodox indifference to a systematic presentation of grace therefore is less an indifference to grace itself than the reflex of a historical indifference to an ancient controversy.

**D**espite his initial claim about a lack of special studies on grace in Orthodox literature, Gloubokowsky is nevertheless able to muster an impressive array of testimonies regarding grace in the Greek Fathers and from these to shape the outline of a very full definition of grace in Greek patristic and modern Orthodox thought. The general definition is certainly much broader than that of Roman Catholic theology:

We must admit in principle that there is everywhere grace and all is the work of grace....Upon this vital ground is based the following immovable and continuous conviction of the Eastern Church authorities: everything accomplished by the Triune God through His goodwill, in creation, providence, and redemption is very grace. (63)

All activities of the Triune God, and particularly as they relate to humankind, are taken to be the manifestations of divine grace because they are each motivated by God's goodwill toward humankind. The beginning of these activities is the creation, which Gregory the Theologian says took place through the grace of God.<sup>3</sup> Basil the Great characterizes the breath of life which God breathed into the first man as "the grace, that came of the inbreathing of God, which man had lost" (16.39), and Gregory of Nyssa in *De hominis opificio* calls the very image of God within the human being "a certain divine grace" (Gloubokowsky 64). This implies that "to everybody and to everything divine grace is inherent. And this is really so because the whole Holy Trinity takes part in it and because all their actions are fulfilled with grace" (64). Hence, the divine grace, as manifested in creation, is universal and found in all human beings. This explains for the Orthodox the various manifestations of "Christian" wisdom and virtue in pre-Christian thinkers like Socrates and Heraclitus, and accounts for the innate longing for God in human beings in general. This "original grace," as marvelous as it may be, does not, however, sufficiently enable human beings to see God and enter into His kingdom. This higher goal requires a higher grace. Grace, as the entire activity of the Triune God, is one, yet it is differentiated according to its function in the recipients: original in all human beings, but special in the salvation of those elected by

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God. An interesting comment on this differentiation is provided by John Chrysostom:

And we too all are saved by grace, but not in like manner; not for the same objects, but for objects much greater and higher. The grace then that is with us is not like theirs [i.e., the Jews of the Old Testament]. For not only was pardon of sins given to us, (since this we have in common with them, for all have sinned) but righteousness also, and sanctification, and sonship, and the gift of the Spirit far more glorious and more abundant. By this grace we have become the beloved of God, no longer as servants, but as sons and friends. (14.2)

**T**hus, grace is seen to operate not only in creation but also in the mechanisms of Old Testament law and ritual, which yielded the forgiveness of Israelite sins, and yet these are not the same degrees of grace that the New Testament believer enjoys. The special grace of the Christian manifests itself as justification, sanctification, sonship, and the general grace of the Holy Spirit.

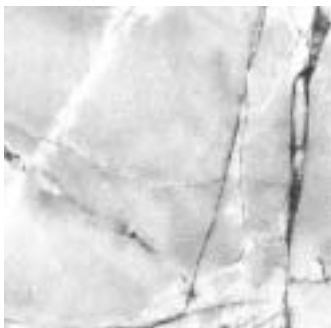
The Greek Fathers, and by adoption Eastern Orthodoxy, hold that the various moments in Christ's physical tenure on earth were manifestations of grace. His becoming human was seen as grace by Athanasius (*Ad. Arianos*, 1.42); His miracles, particularly the raising of Lazarus, were grace according to Cyril of Jerusalem (*Orat. Catech.*, 13.1); Gregory of Nyssa spoke of Christ's redemptive death as permitting and not postponing the dispensation of the gift of grace, foreordained for humankind (*Orat. III in s. Pascha.*), and most elegantly described Christ's rising from the dead as "the three-day grace of resurrection" and simply "the grace of resurrection" (*Orat. Catech.* 35).

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In Orthodox thought Christ's redemption provides the basis upon which the Spirit can act to restore the grace that was lost in the fall. "Regeneration" in this sense turns out to be "a renovation of what was actual but temporarily stopped in its development" (Gloubokowsky 71). "The Lord had breathed into the face of the disciples, restoring again to man that grace which God had breathed into him and which he had lost" (71-72).<sup>4</sup> Gregory of Nyssa says much the same: "Man [is] to be recalled to the grace of his original state" (8), as well as Basil, who declares that we may "return back to the first grace, from which we were alienated through sin" (Gloubokowsky 72).<sup>5</sup>

Yet even though "regeneration" in Eastern Orthodox thought restores us to original grace, a higher degree of grace is understood to be conferred in Christian salvation. "It is not a simple repetition, which, by its very identity with its predecessor, would be predestined to the same failure" (72); rather, quoting Gregory of Nyssa's *Great Catechism*, Gloubokowsky assures us that "regenerated people acquire a certain increase of grace" (72). This underscores the basic Orthodox contention that all activity of the Triune God is grace itself, yet preserves the corollary notion that grace, though one, is not undifferentiated in its effect and function in its recipients. In the final analysis, the grace of "regeneration" is the highest degree of grace that can be enjoyed by human beings.

**T**he Orthodox notion of grace as the very image of God in the human being and how it can be restored through salvation is in stark contrast to the concept of total depravity held by many Protestant thinkers. In Eastern Orthodox thought this original grace was not obliterated by the fall but was instead muted. Because grace is the very cause of human existence, "the Fall into sin could result only in a reduction of the grace and diminution of its actual effect, but not in its cessation or deadness, because in this last case existence itself would cease" (71). As such, grace is still capable of providing movement toward God, and thus, such movement is, according to Orthodox doctrine, within the volitional power of every individual. God respects the freedom of the will and needs not impel human beings into salvation. Certainly original grace, that innate image of God now tarnished by the fall, cannot fully grasp God's salvation or gain justification by Him, but it is the good in the human being, which underlies the exercise of human free will for God's salvation.



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Because grace has appeared apart from the church in the creation of man and still appears in the sanctification of the unregenerate unto salvation, Orthodox theology does not insist that all grace flows from the church, even after the human being is regenerated. This is a softer stance than that of the Roman Catholic Church, which views the administration of all grace as solely within the sphere of the church. But the grace that comes after salvation and is regularly enjoyed by the faithful is mediated solely through the sacraments of the church in Orthodox thought. In fact, it appears that the sacraments as the means of grace have a much stronger existence and practice in modern Orthodoxy than they do in modern Catholicism.

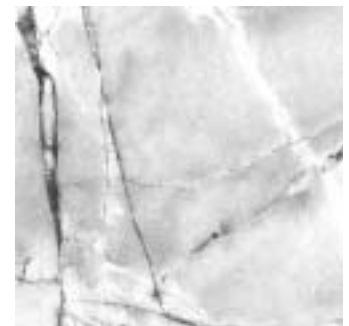
### The Protestant Perspective

The Protestant view of grace is admittedly more difficult to express, since under the general term *Protestant* a great wealth of variety regarding the doctrine of grace now exists. Perhaps it is more economical (and less dangerous) to confine ourselves to the core understanding of grace that exists in common among Protestants. This core understanding is in fact the great impetus of the Protestant Reformation, for what the Reformers essentially claimed was that salvation comes through God's grace alone (*sola gratia*). At the heart of this claim is the Reformers' belief that due to the fall the human being is totally incapable of turning to God without external aid from Him. The aid that comes to save the human being is divine grace, but it must be stressed that the grace is purely on God's side, as a gracious, forgiving attitude in God, which accepts the sacrifice of Christ as sufficient for the justification of the repentant sinner. This is opposed to the Catholic notion of "infused grace," whereby grace is understood as an energy infused into the soul of the repentant sinner which motivates and enables the human being to produce the concomitant works that must accompany faith for salvation.

**T**his objective notion which locates grace within God and looks away from the actual condition of the sinner underlies the basic tenor of the majority of Protestant thought regarding the relationship between God and the believer. Certainly there are strains of Protestantism which admit and cherish a more subjective notion (for example, Wesley's Methodism), but in the main Protestantism regards grace objectively and replicates this objectivity in its understanding of other attributes of Christian life. Because grace is within God, so also must the righteousness required for justification be. For this reason, the Protestant Reformers could not and did not look to any form of infused righteousness within the believer as the basis of justification. Again, the righteousness was external to the believer, being in the person of Christ, who is the righteousness of God. Further, in its most austere form (though certainly not the form held by all Protestants), Protestant theology does not view the ongoing, daily Christian life as drawing its virtues from grace within the believer but from the virtues of Christ imputed to him or her. Indeed, the key to much of these most stringent forms of Protestant thought is the imputation of virtue to the believer, and belief in this imputation of virtue serves as the foundation of Protestant salvation and Christian life. The believer, even when helped by God's grace, is never viewed as the basis for Christian faith; rather, faith, in Protestant thought, must look away to God in Christ for its every object.

The Protestant Reformers considered the effects of the fall so deadening that the human being is for all practical purposes unable to draw near to God and certainly incapable of believing in Him for salvation. This is the Augustinian position, which found full expression in the Reformation. Human nature, crippled by the fall, cannot even extend its reach to accept the saving hand of God; thus, what is needed is the unilateral saving action of God, who in His mercy ignores the actual condition of humankind and rescues those whom He has chosen. Yet He rescues them in a very particular way, not by eradicating their sinful nature but by overlooking it and seeing instead the virtue of the perfect Christ and His perfect sacrifice—imputing to them the

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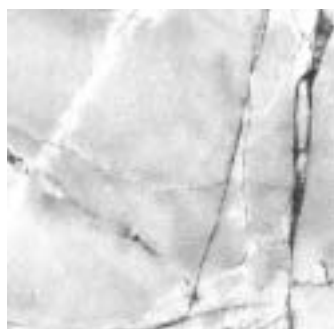
virtues of Him. In Protestant thought the human being is not empowered at all to achieve to a condition that would please God; rather, God, purely on His part, applies the merit of Christ to the sinner and graciously chooses to see the sinner in light of Christ. Saving faith, for the Reformers, is faith in this divine imputation alone; it is not faith in any other truth or revelation of God, not faith in any doctrine concerning God's other activities, such as creation or movement in history. The faith of the Reformation, the faith of Luther's classic *sola fides*, is called a fiduciary faith, and stands in contrast to the faith respected in Catholic thought, which is called a theoretical or dogmatic faith, a faith that believes the various truths and revelations concerning God in all His being and works. Yet even the fiduciary faith of the Protestant Reformation is beyond the natural and fallen capacity of humankind; it too must come by the grace of God. But, unlike the righteousness that is imputed to the believer and is in actuality external to him or her, faith that saves must admittedly be seen as residing in the believer; God cannot believe for the believer. Hence, Protestant theology must concede a graceful infusion at least to this small extent, that God inwardly and gracefully enables the repenting sinner to believe that God now views him or her in relation to the merits of Christ's person and work.

**B**ecause the person and work of Christ are the full basis of Protestant justification, grace in Protestant thought is seen *primarily* as the redemptive action of Christ on the cross. Samuel J. Mikolaski, in presenting an evangelical Protestant notion of grace, continually sounds this note: "The purpose of grace in the Cross commands no less than one-third of the text of the Gospels. The remainder of the New Testament looks back upon this event, the atonement for sin, as the hinge of history and the pivot of the Christian understanding of God" (46). Again, grace is firstly understood not as some energy within the believers that draws God's approval but as the kind attitude within God, external to the believer, that manifests itself in the saving sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Grace, in this primary Protestant sense, is God in Christ as a man dying on the cross to save humankind; it is not a grace to be enjoyed as much as it is one to be observed and believed, and faith in it is the faith by which God justifies and saves.

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There are other "modalities of divine grace" (11), as Mikolaski terms them, even if these are always secondary to the primary redemptive grace: "The full-orbed Christian meaning of grace includes a complex of ideas. These are God's relation to us, His power in us, His transformation of us, and His preservation and final perfection of our lives" (102). Beyond the primary notion of grace as the manifestation of God's external kindness toward humankind (grace as "God's relation to us"), some proponents of Protestant theology recognize grace as the divine power within the believers for their furtherance in the Christian life. "God relates us to Himself in Christ by grace (forgiveness, justification) and He transforms us into Christ's image by the same grace as the new divine power implemented by the Spirit (sanctification)" (54). Grace is also understood to be able to maintain the believers in the Christian life. There is some controversy among Protestants on this point, but Calvin's classic formulation on "perseverance of the saints" holds stronger sway in Protestant theology than its rival concept. According to the Calvinist position, those chosen by God for salvation are not able to lose the privilege, because grace will preserve them until the end. Sins may occur, but the divine grace will assure that the believers remain characteristically holy throughout their lives. Ultimately, it is grace that will perfect in the believers that final state of perfection to which God calls them. Again, some controversy surrounds this notion as well, some maintaining that Christian perfection is possible in this lifetime and others that perfection is a condition of final bliss, yet it is grace that operates to bring the believers to perfection regardless of when it occurs.

Grace also operates within the believers for their service and function in the church and Body of Christ. "The gifts of grace, the charismata or endowments, are those





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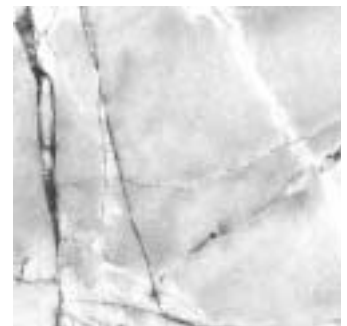
qualities and abilities...which co-ordinate our lives with other lives in the church for the harmonious development of Christ's Body" (103). This is grace in operation in the believers, energizing them for service to God's purpose. As we saw with Catholic thought, these *charismata* have both a general form, which exists in all believers commonly, and a specific form, which exists in the offices of the church. Protestant thought, however, places much greater emphasis on the general form of the grace-gifts, as these underpin the priesthood of all the believers, a notion which also provides a key characteristic to Protestantism, at least theoretically.

**I**n the final analysis, the three major perspectives on grace—Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant—have much to do with their respective views regarding the creation of humankind and its immediate fall. For all perspectives, grace helps humankind out of its predicament; grace is the answer to the fall of man. But because each perspective views the effects of the fall differently, each defines grace differently. The Orthodox view is at one extreme, the Protestant at the other, and the Catholic in between. For the Orthodox, humankind is naturally endowed with grace at creation, grace existing in human beings as the very image of God. The fall, though pervasive and disastrous, is not seen by the Orthodox as so extensive that human beings cannot choose and even act in accordance with God's good pleasure. Human beings today are as free as the first pair and can equally turn toward or turn away from God, and it is necessary that the human will be exercised, for it is created and respected by God as free. But human will is not sufficient for salvation; the human being is not alone acceptable to God. Thus, grace comes to work "alongside" human beings and to fill up the lack inherent in them. Grace is God as a ready Aide for His own good pleasure. At the other extreme is the classic Protestant Reformation view of a fall of humankind that is perhaps not completely obliterating but for all practical purposes incapacitating. The human being is now unable to choose God and His salvation because even the human will has been deadened and is now dysfunctional. The fallen human will cannot choose God, and what is more, the entire human being is poisoned by the effects of the fall. Now the "natural" function of the human being is to sin and to be an enemy of God. In answer to this wretched situation, God in Christ manifested His grace to humankind by dying for the sins of humanity. Those whom He has chosen for His salvation He draws unilaterally to Himself, strengthening their wills to believe that He accepts them based not on anything that they have done or can do but solely on the intense merit of Christ's righteous person and His work at Calvary. Grace is God as the sole and external Agent who regards the fallen human being through the lenses of the very perfect Christ, who died for them. Between these two extremes is the Catholic notion of an infused grace that comes to a humankind which, through the fall, lost its ability to attain salvation but not its freedom to choose God. It is an enabling grace that does not simply impute righteousness but rather empowers its willing recipients to produce works which manifest the quality of the faith within. Faith alongside these grace-energized works justifies the repenting sinner in this Catholic view. Grace is God as the cooperating, internal Agent, there to inwardly help the believers' efforts to meet the demands of God for salvation.

### A Synthesis for a Higher Definition of Grace

If we are able to stand back for a moment from the differences that divide the faith traditions within the church over the doctrine of grace, differences that manifest themselves primarily in relation to different views of humankind in the fall, and instead view grace as it is manifested in the New Testament, primarily in relation to Christ Himself, a very rich and more comprehensive notion of grace manifests itself. Here I wish to offer a synthesized (and hopefully not a synthetic) definition of grace which seeks to capture a fundamental observation. I have somewhat alluded to it in the previous paragraph by characterizing grace in each perspective as the person of God in varying

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roles and degrees of intervention. To be fair, only Eastern Orthodox theology comes out explicitly in support of the concept that grace is God Himself. Catholic theology probably would not object to the notion, but Protestant theology in the main seems to view grace as a relation between God and humankind, a kind attitude in God for humankind in general and for the elect in particular, rather than as an aspect of the being of God. In the synthesis below, the higher definition to be offered is that grace is not merely something done by God or something residing in Him and emanating from Him, but God Himself coming in the Son and being partaken of and enjoyed as the Spirit within the believers.

This insight can be seen in the prologue to John's Gospel:

The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us (and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only Begotten from the Father), full of grace and reality....For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and reality came through Jesus Christ. (1:14, 16-17)

Common Christian faith accepts that Jesus Christ is the incarnation of the Logos, the Son of God, but John's further declaration is that He is also the incarnation of grace. His very fullness, His overflowing and expressed attributes and virtues, is the grace of God, and interaction with Him amounts to the enjoyment of that grace. Whereas the main figure of the old divine economy could merely give law, which placed humankind in a relationship of duty before God, grace had a way to be real and substantial (ἐγένετο) through the incarnation of God in Christ. Christ is certainly gracious in all His doings, but in His person He is, above all else, grace itself. (We can wax theological in this and say that grace is hypostasized in the person of Christ.)

*Jesus Christ is the incarnation of grace. His very fullness, His overflowing and expressed attributes and virtues, is the grace of God, and interaction with Him amounts to the enjoyment of that grace.*

A similar note is sounded in the Epistle to Titus: "For the grace of God, bringing salvation to all men, has appeared" (2:11; literally, "the salvific grace of God has appeared"). Here grace is personified, and we need not limit the personification to a rhetorical level, for this grace not only appeared to us but also now trains us, an even more personal activity. There is more here than a mere emanation from God; rather, it seems that the person of God is being referred to in His aspect of being the gracious Savior of humankind. Paul in like fashion personifies grace in 1 Corinthians: "I labored more abundantly than all of them, yet not I but the grace of God which is with me" (15:10). Paul speaks of grace here as a person within, laboring in his labor and providing his labor the greater value and merit. It is akin to his statement in Galatians 2:20, where he declares, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." The life Paul lived was not solely Paul living but Christ living in, through, and with Paul; likewise, Paul's labor was not solely Paul working but, like so much of his Christian existence, a labor that issued from a mystical union of Paul and Christ, yet a union so dominated and directed by Christ that for all intents and purposes Paul could say that it was Christ Himself who was working. In this case, the Christ who labored in Paul's labor was the personified grace.

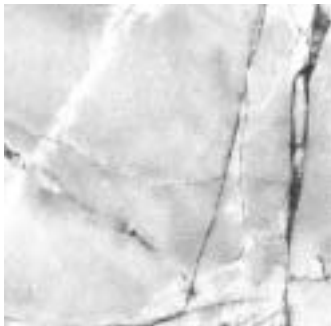
To a lesser degree Paul also identifies grace with Christ in his strong pronouncement against the foolish Galatians: "You have been brought to nought, separated from Christ, you who are being justified by law; you have fallen from grace" (5:4). Traditionally, the contrast noticed by the commentators has been between the law and grace, which no doubt exists here. But at the same time, Paul is placing *Christ* and *grace* in parallel, as the grammatical form (a chiasm) of the verse suggests:

κατηργήθητε ἀπὸ Χριστοῦ

τῆς χάριτος ἐξεπέσατε

you-have-been-brought-to-nought from Christ

from-the grace you-have-fallen



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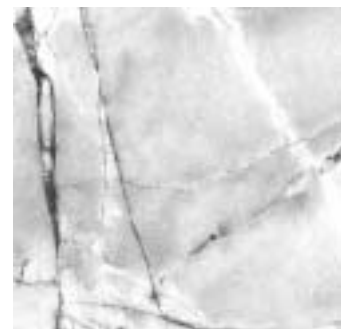
Yet the clearest expression of this identity of grace with Christ is in the closing of 2 Corinthians: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (13:14). Here grace, love, and fellowship are best understood not as emanations from the hypostases of the Divine Trinity but as the Divine Hypostases themselves as grace, love, and fellowship to the believers. Just as the Spirit is God communicated to the believers (John 16:13-15) and God is love to the believers (1 John 4:8, 16), so also Christ is grace to the believers, not merely gracious, nor merely a provider of grace.

**T**his is not to deny that the writers of the New Testament considered grace as both a divine attitude for humankind and a divine energy operating within the believers. But we are speaking here not of conceptual categories of theology but of a divine reality that certainly exists, and, as such, the reality of grace as the person of God coming to the believers for their enjoyment and participation in Him must always be understood to be present in all experiences of grace. The writers of the New Testament may, in this text or that one, view the operation of grace as though it is merely an emanation from the Divine Trinity, but the fact that they also in other texts view grace as God Himself in His saving operation should cause us to realize that even in these former texts grace as a person is to be perceived as well. There are not two graces, one His person and one from His person, but one grace that comes to humankind for a range of applications. It is analogous to the dual view in the New Testament regarding the Spirit. On the one hand, *pneuma* refers to the third person of the Divine Trinity, and on the other hand, to the divine essence that fills the believers for their Christian life and service; yet even in the places where the latter sense predominates, it is not appropriate to completely cast away the former sense, for there is only God the Spirit, who as the third of the Trinity functions in a filling way for life and power. In all instances of grace in the New Testament we should remember what this grace primarily is—Christ as the embodiment of grace partaken of and enjoyed as the Spirit within the believers. He as grace redeems, draws, justifies, sanctifies, transforms, and glorifies the believers.

This much being said about grace as the person of God, let us conclude by quickly surveying how inclusive grace is in God’s economy. Taken in its whole compass, grace turns out to be the very essence of God’s operation in His economy; almost every detail of God’s work among humankind is characterized as being grace. In fact, so impressive is the catalog of Grace’s activity that even those points of God’s work not expressly called grace we are bound to understand as also being grace. The Triune God, as He contemplates, plans, and acts for His glory by fully saving us, is in all His operations Grace abundant.

**G**od, in His good pleasure, desires that humankind express Him for His glory. To this end, He has selected some to be His many sons in glory. Initiated by God’s kindness and executed according to His gracious choice, it is a selection of grace (Rom. 11:5). These He has mystically graced in the person of His unique divine Son, His Beloved (Eph. 1:6). Though they have been damaged by the fall, have been usurped by His devious enemy, and have become even His enemies, He justifies them by grace (Titus 3:7; Rom. 3:24) through the death of His Son, itself an activity of grace (Heb. 2:9; 2 Cor. 8:9). This salvation through His own Son is characterized as being of grace, and not of ourselves (Eph. 2:5, 8; 2 Tim. 1:9; Acts 15:11). When we received this salvation, we indeed heard and knew the grace of God in truth (Col. 1:6), but even more the Lord’s grace super-abounded with faith and love to us in Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 1:14). Yet, on the other hand, we understand that the faith that we received from God gives us access to greater grace, and maintaining our entire Christian existence in this grace, we stand and even boast in grace (Rom. 5:2). We indeed become partakers of grace upon grace (John 1:16), the very fullness of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

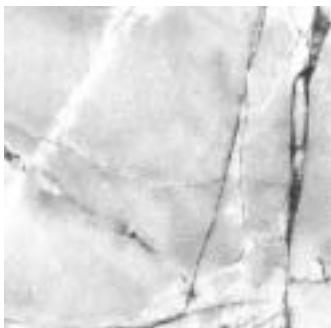
*The reality of grace as the person of God coming to the believers for their enjoyment and participation in Him must always be understood to be present in all experiences of grace.*



Salvation by grace entails the enjoyment of the abundance of grace (Rom. 5:17). Where once we were constituted sinners, now grace constitutes us righteous (v. 19); where once sin abounded, grace has super-abounded (v. 20); where once sin reigned in death, now grace reigns unto eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (v. 21). Previously, as fallen members of the old creation, sin was our main characteristic; now, as regenerated members of the new creation, grace is our main characteristic. We have become fellow heirs of the grace of His divine life (1 Pet. 3:7). Our hearts, though sullied at times by sins, are confirmed by this grace and not by mere animal sacrifices (Heb. 13:9). We discover that God's throne is not to us primarily a throne of judgment but a throne of grace, at which we can freely and constantly find grace for timely help (4:16). Grace, which is quite simply in Christ Jesus, empowers us for all endeavors (2 Tim. 2:1). In general, grace affords us a living that glorifies the name of the Lord Jesus Christ among everyone around us and even glorifies us in Him (2 Thes. 1:12), and grace enables us to serve God well-pleasingly with piety and fear (Heb. 12:28). In our personal weaknesses and tribulations, grace is more than sufficient to sustain and uphold us, for it is indeed the very power of Christ (2 Cor. 12:9). In the temptations that we face, God gives grace, which is much greater than the evil around us (James 4:6). In the persecutions that we as followers of the Lord undergo, our doing good and suffering, our bearing the sorrows of being treated unjustly, is grace itself because it is by Christ Himself as grace that we endure (1 Pet. 2:19-21). This is the true grace of God (5:12), and in this grace we can and must grow (2 Pet. 3:18). Grace should so fill our living that even our words minister grace to others (Eph. 4:29; Col. 4:6) and should so overflow in our gatherings that we sing to one another with grace in our hearts to God (3:16). Grace can so permeate our living that it comes forth as our own expression in matters as practical as our giving materially to the needs of the saints; our giving by grace becomes grace itself to others (1 Cor. 16:3; 2 Cor. 8:1, 4, 6, 19; 9:14).

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**G**race regenerates us to become not individual believers but the members of Christ's Body, and grace constitutes and energizes us for our function in His Body. Most basically, grace enriches us in all utterance and knowledge (1 Cor. 1:4-5) for service in His Body. Each member is a genuine gift to the Body of Christ, but our gift varies according to the grace that is given to each of us (Rom. 12:6). Grace produces the spiritual life-gift in us for our function in the Body. Yet it is also the case that grace is further given according to the measure of the gift of Christ in us (Eph. 4:7). Grace supplies us for our function as the gifts in the Body. In the enjoyment of grace for His Body, we have the apostle Paul as our pattern. To him—he calls himself the least of all saints and, doing so, takes away any excuse we may have for not entering into the same experience—was grace given as a gift so that he could minister the unsearchable riches of Christ as the gospel (3:7-8). He was particularly given a stewardship of the grace of God for the believers (v. 2), being entrusted with the dispensing of grace to all God's children. But each one of us is exhorted, with equal gravity, to minister the gift, likewise given and entrusted to us by God, among the believers, proving ourselves to also be good stewards of the varied grace of God (1 Pet. 4:10-11).



The ministry of the apostles was not only by grace but also for grace and unto grace. Paul tells us that he was called to his service through the grace of God (Gal. 1:15), and he repeatedly mentions that grace was given to him for his apostleship (Rom. 12:3; 15:15; 1 Cor. 3:10; 15:10; Gal. 2:9; Eph. 3:2, 7). This grace, he says, was given to him for the believers; hence, his apostleship was, in fact a stewardship of the grace of God (v. 2). In everything Paul and the other apostles conducted themselves in grace among the believers (2 Cor. 1:12). Even in their many hardships their enjoyment of grace abounded for the sake of the saints (4:15). So full of grace was the living and work of the apostles that Paul could refer to a visit to a church as grace and to a second visit as “double grace” (1:15; cf. Rom. 1:11; Philem. 22). The preeminence of grace

in Paul's ministry is evidenced by the many salutations and closings in his Epistles that impart grace to his recipients.

Ultimately, grace, which first appeared to us when Christ came as the incarnation of God (John 1:17; Titus 2:11), will be brought to us consummately when He comes again, revealed in glory (1 Pet. 1:13). We have been called, according to His mercy, to glorify God, but in a practical sense we have been called to the praise of the glory of His grace, the grace with which He graced us in the Beloved (Eph. 1:6). In the ages to come we will not only express the attributes of our marvelous God in glory, but more finely, more precisely, we will display the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness (2:7). The God whom we glorify is the grace that we have enjoyed in His calling us, saving us, and perfecting us. It is the grace that is even now with our spirit (Gal. 6:18; Phil. 4:23; Philem. 25). May God as grace be enjoyed by all the saints. Amen. AFC

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Parenthetical numbers in this section correspond to section numbers in the *Catechism*.

<sup>2</sup>To this, the further Aquinian (actually Augustinian) distinction between prevenient and subsequent grace could be added, a distinction which in its definition has to do with the relationship between the multiple operations of grace upon the believer. Aquinas's use of Augustine is instructive for the distinction: "It is prevenient, inasmuch as it heals, and subsequent, inasmuch as, being healed, we are strengthened; it is prevenient, inasmuch as we are called, and subsequent, inasmuch as we are glorified" (*De natura et gratia* 23).

<sup>3</sup>Paraphrased by Gloubokowsky, page 64, from *Orat.*, 23, in *Egyptiorum adventum*, 8.

<sup>4</sup>Quoted from Basil's *De Spiritu sancto*, 16.39.

<sup>5</sup>Quoted from *Sermo asceticus*.

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*We have been called  
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glory of His grace.  
In the ages to come  
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God in glory,  
but we will display  
the surpassing riches  
of His grace  
in kindness.*

