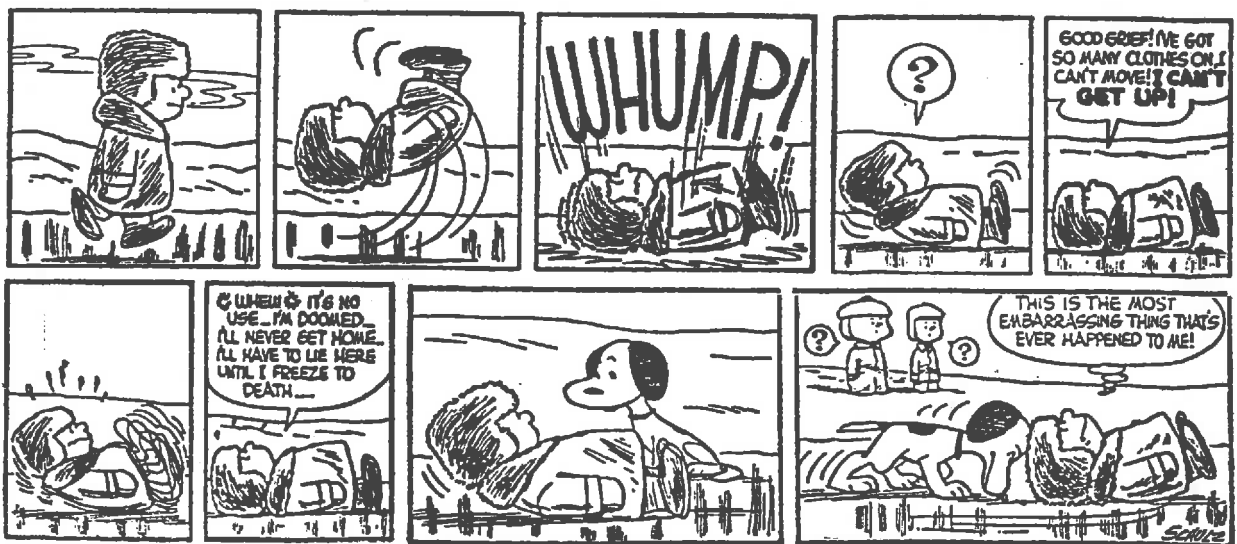


What is Grace?

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Grace is perhaps the key theological insight of the Lutheran Reformation. *Sola gratia*, or 'by grace alone,' was one of Luther's famous catch-cries. But sometimes the words and concepts we hear most often and seem most familiar to us are the very ones that are the most difficult to actually grasp. So just what do we mean by grace? Definitions like 'undeserved love', 'unmerited forgiveness' and 'God's free gift of salvation' all come into the discussion. Yet we can still be left feeling that they are only scratching the surface of describing what it means to have a gracious God.

Ironically, one of the best definitions of grace in recent times comes not from a theologian, but from a cartoonist. Charles Schulz, in the comic strip Peanuts, once portrayed Charlie Brown walking along a frozen lake. He suddenly slips and falls on the ice. His winter clothing, much like the weight of our own worries and burdens, weighs him down so much that he is completely helpless to get up again. Then suddenly good ole' Snoopy comes to the rescue and shoves him off the ice. Even though Charlie Brown finds his situation humbling, he has been rescued.



In the same way our hurts, fears and mistakes weigh us down. We simply cannot rescue ourselves. Then God comes along and rescues us. We might find it embarrassing, because we wanted to believe we could do it ourselves. We might not even seem particularly grateful. Yet God rescues us nonetheless. No qualms. No second thoughts. No conditions. That's grace!

The Biblical Conception of Grace

The image that Schulz, a Christian, portrayed so beautifully, is built upon firm biblical foundations. In the Old Testament the closest approximation we find to the word grace is the Hebrew *hen*, which is often used to denote the stronger of two parties coming voluntarily to the aid of the weaker. The phrase most frequently used in this regard is “found favour in his eyes.” See, for instance, the accounts of Esau and Jacob (Genesis 32:5); Boaz and Ruth (Ruth 2:10,13); and David and Joab (2 Samuel 14:22). It occurs occasionally with reference to God, as in Genesis 6:8: “But Noah found favour in the eyes of the Lord.” Also significant in the Old Testament, and often found in conjunction with the idea of a stronger party coming to the aid of the weaker, is the Hebrew concept of *hesed*, translated as ‘faithfulness,’ ‘covenant loyalty,’ or ‘steadfast love’ (Exodus 33:17-19; 34:6-7).

In the New Testament the word normally translated as grace is *χάρις* (*charis*). It occurs most frequently in the Pauline epistles (100 out of 155 occurrences) where the Apostle seeks tirelessly to distinguish God's free gift from the Rabbinic ideas of salvation through works, cooperation and obedience to the Law. (Cf. esp. Romans 3:21-24; 6:15; 2 Corinthians 1:12; Galatians 2:21). God's grace, the Apostle points out, is the source of our salvation (Ephesians 2:5,8). Paul also describes grace (*charis*) as that which characterises the entire life of the

Christian. In other words, the whole of the Christian life is one of grace (Romans 5:2; 2 Corinthians 6:1ff.).

Augustine: The 'Teacher of Grace'

Yet despite strong biblical witness to the power and centrality of grace, the concept really only came onto centre stage in the history of Christian thought with a fourth-century North African bishop and former professor of rhetoric named Aurelius Augustinus, or as he is better known, St. Augustine. No one in the early centuries of the Christian church picked up Paul's emphasis on grace more enthusiastically than did St. Augustine. In fact, so central was the idea of a gracious God in Augustine's thinking that later generations gave him the title *Doctor gratiae*, the teacher of grace. What a wonderful way to be remembered.

Augustine believed that God showed grace to human beings in different ways in different ages of the world. But in this final age of the world, the age ushered in by Christ, God's grace flows forth so profusely that Augustine labelled it the *age of grace*. In this age God's grace is available to all peoples. Wrote Augustine: "With the coming of Christ the ...[final] age has begun, so that now the grace of the Spirit, which in previous times was known to a few patriarchs and prophets, may be made manifest to all nations; to the intent that no one should worship God but freely [*gratis*], fondly desiring of him ... that eternal life alone in which [they are] ... to enjoy God himself."¹

Augustine also distinguished between various types of grace according to the action they work on the human person and the timing of this action. For instance, he spoke of a prevenient grace (*gratia praeveniens*), that is, the grace of the Holy Spirit given to sinful humans through preaching of the Word and which necessarily precedes repentance. Augustine

¹ Augustine, *De catechizandis rudibus*, 22.39.

also taught of God's operative grace (*gratia operans*). This is the grace that effects conversion without any help or assistance from the sinner. God "operates," as Augustine said, "without us, in order that we may will; but when we will, and so will that we act, He cooperates with us."² For Augustine, therefore, even prevenient grace is a result of operative grace and does not rely upon anything within the human person. Augustine knew also of a cooperating grace (*gratia cooperans*) found in a person after conversion and which enables the Christian to perform good works. Wrote Augustine: "We can ... ourselves do nothing to effect good works of piety without Him ... cooperating when we will [to do good works]." Augustine focuses on God's cooperation rather than our own, hence, God "perfects by His cooperation what He initiates by His operation."³ For Augustine, God's grace is so powerful and overwhelming that he also taught that it was irresistible (*gratia irresistibilis*).

Finally, in the thought of Augustine grace is portrayed as an infusion of love (*inspiratio dilectionis*) that extends to every period of the life of the individual, including infancy.⁴ But in all these 'graces' Augustine's teaching is seen to be *monergistic*, that is, it is the work of God and not the work of God in cooperation with human beings in the sense that our action contributes anything to God's grace or in any way merits grace.

Luther and the Search for a Gracious God

Augustine's teaching on grace is very important in our own tradition because Luther, as an Augustinian monk, was reared theologically on Augustine's teaching on grace. Yet Luther's view was not simply a repetition of what Augustine had taught. In the thousand years between the two great teachers of grace, the doctrine had become so encrusted with scholastic

² Augustine, *Grace and Free Will*, XVII.33.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ See Augustine, *City of God*, XXI.16.

distinctions and legal terminology that it was barely recognisable. Indeed Luther, as a monk of the Augustinian order, spent his early years in the monastery searching desperately for a gracious God.

Luther sought to appease God's wrath through every available means. He did good works. He whipped himself (a common monastic practice in the medieval period) to show that he was contrite. He sought to confess every sin in his life, no matter how trivial – to the point of wearing on the patience of his father confessor - all in the hope of winning God's favour. But he continued to feel empty. The word of grace that finally broke through to Luther was from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans 1:17 "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed ... that is by faith from first to last." Luther finally got it. God didn't want him to do anything to earn God's favour. Nor could Luther have done anything. What needed to be done had already been done by Christ. God simply desired us to respond to God's gracious act in an attitude of thankfulness and trust.⁵ This insight changed not only Luther's life – it changed the course of the history of the church.

As we now know well, *Sola gratia* (or grace alone) became one of the cornerstones of Luther's theology. Luther saw grace as the dominant theme of the Bible. In his book, *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther boldly stated: "What, indeed, does almost more than half of Holy Scripture consist of but sheer promises of grace, in which mercy, life, peace, and salvation are offered by God to human beings?"⁶

Although Luther consciously followed Augustine in much of his understanding of salvation, he departed from him significantly in Augustine's concept of an irresistible grace. To Luther, a grace that could not be refused or resisted didn't sound like grace at all. Grace is

⁵ It is worth noting that the Greek and Latin words for grace (*charis* and *gratia*) are also the words for thanks. In a sense, we respond to God's grace (*gratia*) graciously with an attitude of thanks (*gratia*).

⁶ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, LW 33:136

infused, Luther argued, but is not irresistible.⁷ For this reason we say that Luther held to a resistible grace (*gratia resistibilis*). The *Formula of Concord* follows Luther in this regard when it states that: “All who stubbornly and perseveringly resist the Holy Spirit’s activities and impulses, which take place through the Word, do not receive the Holy Spirit but grieve and lose him. ... There remains also in the regenerated a resistance ...”⁸

This was Luther’s gracious God. A God who loves and forgives us apart from any merit on our part. A God who freely pours grace into our lives. But yet a God who does not force grace upon us. In short, Luther’s God invoked love and respect, not fear and terror. Even the way in which Luther spoke of grace strikes one as gracious. We are speaking here of what has been called Luther’s “radical simplification of the traditional theology of grace.”⁹ Luther knew of the various categories and types of grace spoken of in scholastic thought. He was an able enough theologian to be able to dissect the doctrine of grace to every possible subdivision. Yet if we search in Luther’s writings for his views on the relative value, say, of prevenient grace as opposed to preparatory grace, or of the precise distinction between operating and cooperating grace, we will find barely a reference. For Luther grace was grace. Whenever and however it acts upon us and however we experience it, there was only one grace, and that was the free and transforming act of God’s forgiveness. Grace, for Luther, was God’s gift of Christ. In his preface to Paul’s epistle to the Romans Luther defines grace thus: “Grace ... means God’s favor, or the good will which in himself he bears toward us, by which he is disposed to give us Christ and to pour into us the Holy Spirit with his gifts.”¹⁰

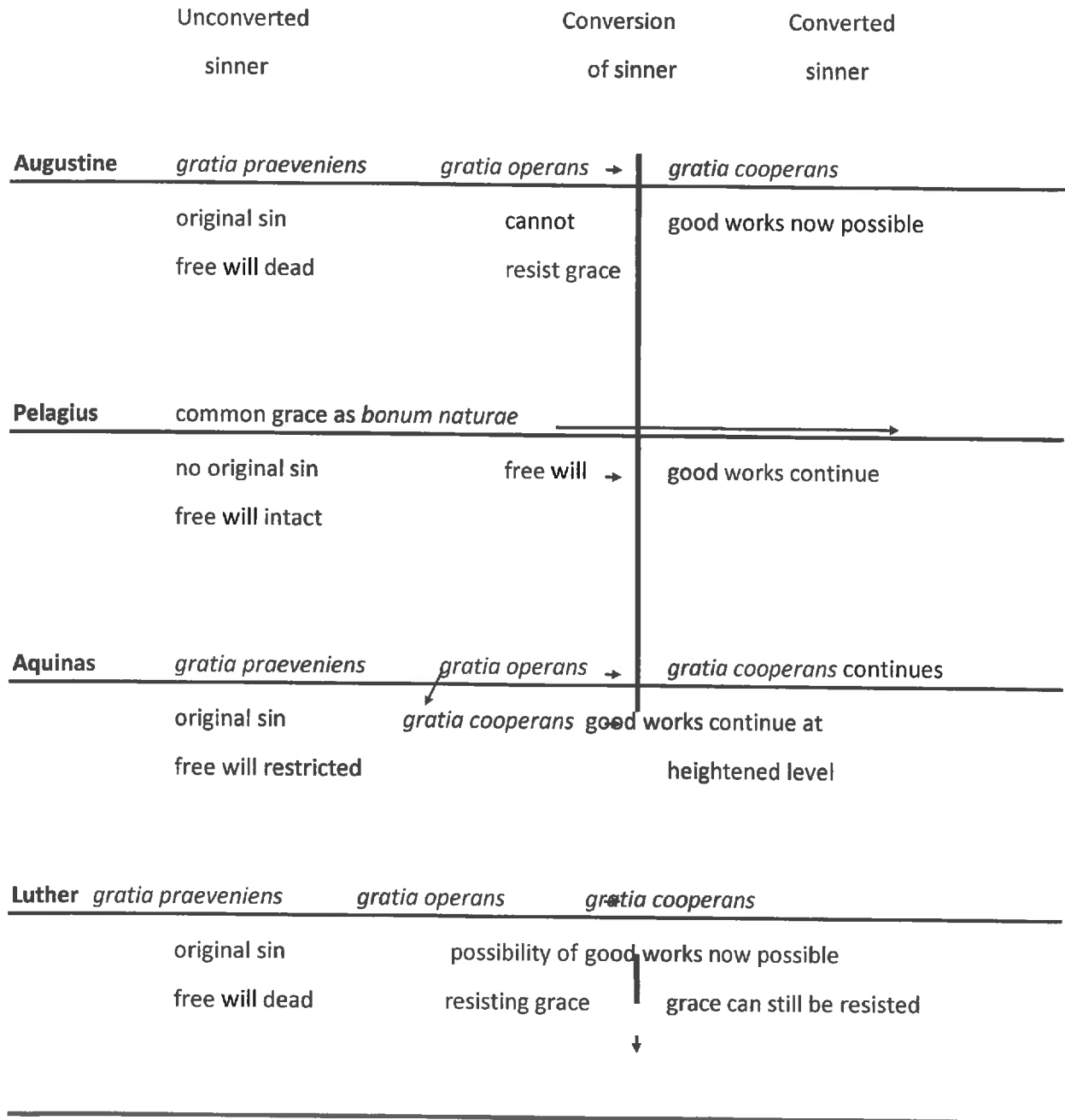
⁷ *LW* 31:99f.

⁸ *Formula of Concord, Solid Dec.* II.83, Tappert, p.537.. Cf. also *Solid Dec.* II.64, and *CA XII.7*.

⁹ Harold Ditmanson, *Grace in Experience and Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1977), 43f.

¹⁰ *LW* 35:369.

De Gratia



In the above chart grace is portrayed in relation to the conversion of the sinner. A complete system of grace is not here depicted. The lines emanating from each of the four Christian thinkers represents the experience of an individual sinner before God. The space above each line represents what God does, the space below the line represents what the human does or does not do.

Terms: *gratia preveniens* = prevenient grace, given by Spirit, must precede repentance.

gratia operans = operating grace of God which effects conversion of the sinner.

gratia cooperans = cooperating grace. Found in person only after conversion in Augustine and Luther, but already in the process of conversion itself in Thomas.

bonum naturae = a benefit of nature