

Two Concepts of God's Grace

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Augustine (354-430), Bishop of Hippo and renowned theologian, was also the father of a concept of grace that laid the background for many false doctrines of our day. If you are studying "free will," "depravity," "miraculous conversion," "faith only," "enabling power within the saint," or "impossibility of apostasy," you should do your home work on this man's teaching and influence upon the "Christian" world. I recommend History of the Christian Church, by Philip Schaff (Vol. 3, Eerdmans), but I warn you Schaff is a Reformed scholar, deeply steeped in Calvinism and the Historic concept of "church." If time and inclination permit, tackle Basic Writings of Saint Augustine, edited by W.J. Oates (Baker Book House, reprinted 1980).

According to Augustine, Adam in Eden possessed freedom of will, to do good; reason, to know God; and the grace of God. By "grace" he meant an "enabling power" without which Adam could not persevere in good.

Augustine said the consequences of Adam's sin were: (1) Loss of the freedom of choice; (2) Obstruction of knowledge (right understanding); (3) Loss of the grace of God, meaning loss of the power which enabled man to perform the good he willed; (4) Loss of paradise; (5) Concupiscence (the predominance of flesh over spirit); (6) Physical death; and (7) so-called "original sin" or the hereditary guilt which passed to his posterity. With Augustine, this is the "native bent of the soul towards evil;" so says Schaff. This concept, while not entirely originating with Augustine, was given prominence by his great influence on theology. His controversy with the British monk, Pelagius, became the "issue" of that day and for generations to come. A preponderance of earlier church writers had argued "free will" on the part of man -- had in fact charged that denial of free will was a mark of heretics. But now total depravity, necessity for miraculous "grace" (i.e., power), etc., became orthodox teaching. Any who questioned this was branded "Anti" -- excuse me, I meant "Pelagian." (Name-calling is an ancient substitute for reasoning.) At a much later date the Roman Catholic church developed their doctrine of "works of supererogation;" and Reformers reverted to Augustinian theology, reemphasizing a miraculous operation of the Holy Spirit in conversion. John Calvin's Christian Institutes (first published 1536) systematized the Augustinian concept, deeply affected about eighty percent of the "Protestant" churches, and produced the "evangelical" type of "conversion" common today.

A careful look at current articles on salvation and perseverance reveals traces of Augustine's erroneous definition of grace as an "enabling power." God did, as an expression of His grace, give a measure of the Spirit necessary for the working of miracles (Rom. 12:6; Eph. 4:7). By extension or metaphor the gift itself, or various blessings of God, may be called "grace" (1

Cor. 15:10; Acts 6:8). But this is a far cry from saying "grace" is an "enabling power," or assuming that salvation by grace necessitates some direct or immediate operation of divine power on the subject.

"Grace" is a benevolent attitude or disposition; good will, and favorable intentions (cf. Lexicons; and Moulton & Milligan). The Greek, *charis* is not always clearly differentiated in meaning from *chara* (joy), and has a tangent meaning, "thanks, gratitude." Evangelicals abuse the word when they refer to their "experience of grace" -- as a "better felt than told" power by which they are miraculously regenerated. And "our" brethren misuse the term by applying it as an "enabling power" by which Christians persevere.

Paul wrote of God "who saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before times eternal. . ." (2 Tim. 1:9, *emph. mine*). Grace is an attribute of God, like love, mercy, truth, and justice. The "glory" of God is His essence, so that a manifestation of His characteristics "glorifies" God. Now read carefully, "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father), full of grace and truth" (Jn. 1:14). The supreme manifestation of deity (Jesus Christ) is the supreme manifestation of "grace and truth." From God's eternal nature came the love and mercy that offers salvation to all mankind, "according to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Eph. 3:11).

"God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son. . ." We should do more than counter "faith only" advocates when we read that verse. We should recognize the eternal grace of God which gave the world a Savior (1 Tim. 4: 10). Salvation is the "gift of God" (Eph. 2:8): not a "Watkin's liniment" reserved for special cases, apply when needed; but Christ on the cross, the means of redemption for all mankind. Check the following emphasis against the context of Romans 3. "All have sinned . . . being justified . . . by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ . . . a propitiation . . . for the believer." We receive God's grace by coming to Christ and abiding in Him. The "enabling power" is in the good news (gospel) of Christ (Rom. 1: 16), whom the world is invited to receive (Mk. 16:15-16).

God's grace benefits the alien sinner when he ceases to be an alien - when he comes to Christ. Christ's blood (sacrifice) paid the penalty of sin, so that God can be just, even as He declares one free of guilt (Rom. 3:26). By the same principle, having come to Christ, man continues to be benefitted by God's grace - to the extent he is faithful to Christ. That is the essential meaning of the much controverted passage in 1 John 1:5, and controversy would cease if we would interpret details in the light of fundamental truth; rather than alter the basic principle to fit our concept of some detail.

To sum up: salvation is from God, the gift of God, proceeding from His very essence or eternal nature. The means by which God chooses to give that

salvation is Jesus Christ: God gives of Himself, expressing grace toward man. The operation (or the "way" God chooses to do it; again, the fruit of divine characteristics of justice and mercy) is forgiveness, through blood. He paid the price of our sins "once for all" (Heb. 10:10-f). The condition upon which individuals participate in or become benefactors of this salvation, is faith, and of course this is obedient faith (Rom. 16:26; Heb. 5:9). We must give up "self" and trusting in self, and put our trust in Jesus Christ (Matt. 16:24). Man is free to accept or reject God's grace, but must give account in final judgment for this momentous decision.

Guardian of Truth XXX: 6, pp. 167, 183

March 20, 1986

