

### Grace on Trial

It is not as if the Holy Spirit had been idle until the Pentecost outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the church. According to the scripture, the Holy Spirit's activity has been evident all along: in creation itself, in the lives of the Hebrew patriarchs and matriarchs, in the work of the Old Testament prophets, and certainly in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. But it could probably be said that the Holy Spirit went on hyper-drive at Pentecost, calling and equipping apostles and disciples and converts by the 100s and 1000s, and coalescing them into the body of this new thing, the church; and creating space for the Good News of God's grace in Jesus Christ to be proclaimed throughout the world. Two thousand years later, it is good for us to be reminded of what a new, radical and extraordinary turn of events the origin of the Christian church was; because, for one thing, the church immediately found itself in conflict with the prevailing religions and cultures; but for another, there is still that about the church that remains new, radical and extraordinary, and probably always will.

And, in a word, what was new and radical and extraordinary then, and now, about the church, is the grace of God. That grace was embodied in the person and work, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. According to the prologue of John's Gospel, Jesus Christ was "full of grace and truth." In the risen Lord Jesus Christ, that same grace rules over heaven and earth. And in the Holy Spirit, that grace is operative through the church and throughout the world. And so it goes without saying that grace did not come into the world in a vacuum. Grace came into the world, and always comes into the world, with great upheaval.

Grace, I hope you know, always threatens every notion of human self-reliance, and especially so when that notion of self-reliance is institutionalized. Every and any earthly, human institution, whether religious, political, cultural, tribal or economic that claims to establish justice and righteousness, peace and security, success and prosperity, power and privilege **in and of itself** is threatened by grace. The presence of God's grace in the world exposes the very real limitations of all human institutions. In fact, grace meets humanity at the very limits of human endeavor, at that very point at which humans and our institutions will inevitably and utterly fail: fail to save, fail to love, fail to make people whole, fail to establish peace or justice, fail to overcome death and dying. And unless people, all people, who meet grace at such a breaking point are ready to be converted, ready to enter into a life of repentance and reliance upon God's grace, grace itself gets put on trial.

In the earliest days of the church, still centered in Jerusalem and still associated with the Temple, the apostles Peter, James and John lived through the first trial of grace, as over against Judaism. Under their leadership, the church had to determine just how much Hebrew law Christians had to observe, a challenge that came to a head over the question of uncircumcised Gentile converts to Christianity. To make a long story short, against tremendous pressure, the early church acted on the side of grace, not requiring early converts to Christianity to be circumcised. It was more than a symbolic change; it set the tone for a church that would be inclusive and not exclusive.

Later, throughout the missionary travels of the apostle Paul, associated during this time mostly with local synagogues throughout the Mediterranean region, the trial of grace again centered on the law and the commandments, but in a much broader sense this time. Paul had at least two fundamental questions to try to resolve: whether faith could replace works in the plan for salvation; and whether grace could replace law in the plan for salvation. In his now well-known formula found in Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul said: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast."(2:8f) Unfortunately, just because Paul said it, that did not settle these questions forever. They had to be revisited often, and most poignantly during the Protestant Reformation. It seems that the human ego insists upon earning salvation through adherence to rules and the practice of good works, even though our individual lives and all of human history together testify to the human inability to do so.

But the trial of grace that our text today is about was a shift from the earlier law and gospel debates. The letter of I Peter was addressed to new churches in Greek speaking communities of Asia Minor. Far removed from the original synagogue setting with which Paul was familiar, these churches were made up almost entirely of gentiles and these new gentile Christians did not struggle with the role of laws and commandments in their lives as had earlier converts. According to the text of I Peter, in this setting, grace was on trial for redeeming and transforming people's lives.

The setting was clearly the Roman Empire. Caesar Augustus had ushered in an era of security and prosperity for the empire. It was a high time for commerce, and a high time for culture. But if the political structure was clearly Roman, the mind set was altogether Greek. As wealth increased, so did leniency. As luxury began to be more and more commonplace, so was social indulgence. The old Roman morals relaxed, right up to the point of collapse.(see the discussion of this in E. Lohse, *The NT Environment*, p.214) In living the high life, the people did not just tolerate, but promoted promiscuous behavior. They loosened their inhibitions with alcohol and misbehaved together, intentionally, in disturbing, destructive and even abusive ways. And then they bragged about it. What we would clearly call immoral behavior for them had become a mark of sophistication and even superiority. Why, they even understood it to be commended by the gods, as a sort of reason for existence!

The Christians among them, although thoroughly gentiles themselves, no few of whom had at one time freely joined in all the revelry, took a bold step back from such ways of living. Grace had entered into their lives. But grace led them to **no** self-righteousness. Grace led them to humility, and to simplicity, and to respect for their fellow humans. Grace had led them into compassion for the world of people and creatures around them. Grace had given them respect for the beauty and balance of nature and for the many wonderful human talents and gifts around them. Grace had led them into a lifetime of discovery of the depths and riches of love. Grace had led them into lives of humble service for the very sake of the One by whose grace they were saved.

So they stopped the revelry. They curtailed their pleasure-seeking. They embraced sobriety. They no longer insisted upon luxury. In fact they shared their wealth with the poor. They turned away from violence and abuse. They did not seek revenge. They found joy in forgiveness and they found purpose in giving. They lifted up the weak

and vulnerable around them, and they took up ministries of healing and making others whole. And before too long, they began to suffer for this evidence of grace in their lives.

This is the “fiery trial” of which I Peter writes. What looked to the pagans at first like non-conformity soon was met with public scorn. And before too long the would-be Greek sophisticates declared Christians inferior, deemed them a problem that needed to be dealt with. It was enough just to identify them as “Christian” to drag them into court. This is the adversary the letter of I Peter warns about, who prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking to devour the people of grace. So grace was put back on trial, and Christians suffered, not just for being different, but for being good – for their ethics and for the general morality of their lives.

And what was the advice of the apostle to these people suffering because of the grace in their lives? To not be surprised at the conflicts that grace brings about in life. To continue to do good. To bear up under the suffering. To trust and rely and depend utterly upon the God of grace. And to rest assured, that the God of all grace will Himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish them. And what the apostle means, I am sure, is that grace itself gets the last word, and that last word is always a word of comfort, a word of love, and of course, a word of salvation. I wonder if grace is on trial anywhere around here these days?