A Mennonite view of grace

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It is a sign of God's grace that, unlike in the sixteenth century, Lutherans and Mennonites today do not have a disputation but a dialogue between sisters and brothers who know themselves to be members of the same body. In a real sense we are stepping into each other's shoes, each addressing an issue dear to the other.[1] I am eager to discover to what degree we might in the end turn out to be firmly in our own *and* the other's shoes. As I have contemplated this Lutheran-Mennonite exchange, I have wondered how church relations over the years would have gone if one of the tasks would have been to make a case for the gospel from within the other's cherished conviction.

Our salvation, our liberation, is premised first and last on the grace of God. And what is this grace? It is the sovereign, free, loving, and life-giving exercise of mercy toward errant and lost humanity.

Interestingly, the issue we might variously characterize as grace versus works, or justification by faith versus discipleship, has apparently not been part of the recent Lutheran-Mennonite dialogue culminating in the rite of apology and forgiveness in Stuttgart in 2010. Perhaps the issue is settled. If so, that might well be good news: Lutherans have discovered the importance of discipleship, and Mennonites the importance of grace. Perhaps. As my comments will indicate, I think there is still much for us Mennonites, at least, to grapple with when it comes to grace.

"By grace you have been saved!"

I am not so much a theologian or a historian as a student of the Bible. And I have spent much time with the letter to the Ephesians. Chapter 2 contains what sounds like a slogan straight out of the Reformation. Twice we hear the words "By grace you have been saved!"

In verse 5 the forceful assertion literally interrupts the grand recitation of the drama of salvation (perhaps it's a Lutheran interpolation?). In verse 8 it sounds like a warning (of Lutherans toward Anabaptists?) for those who might be impressed by their own abilities and capacities for good: "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."

You cannot state the matter more unambiguously. Our salvation, our liberation, is premised first and last on the grace of God. And what is this grace? It is the sovereign, free, loving, and life-giving exercise of mercy toward errant and lost humanity. Consider the verses leading up to the Reformation slogan. After describing humanity in the grip of the dark "prince of the power of the air" and stumbling about in disobedience like zombies, Ephesians 2:4–7 says this:

> *But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.*

Nowhere will we find a more succinct summary of the gospel. This is the God who shines the sun and pours the rain out on both the just and the unjust, as in the Sermon on the Mount. This is the God whose justice comes to full expression in mercy, as in Romans 3, who loves us while we are still enemies, as in Romans 5. This is the "God-for-us" of Romans 8:32–39.

> *If God is for us, who is against us? . . . It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. . . . For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Not of one mind

As central as this affirmation is to the gospel, Mennonites are not of one mind about grace. For one, as I have illustrated, and as any concordance will show, this language comes not so much from the Gospels as from Paul, and Mennonites know he was Lutheran!

Seriously, as much as there is sometimes a sense that grace is someone else's agenda, there are some—no, many—among us who feel strongly both the lack of full appreciation in our tradition about grace and its centrality in the Christian life. At the end of his life, theologian James Reimer stressed again and again how central confidence in God's grace was for him.[2] Grace represented for him the kindness and acceptance by God of flawed human beings, who fail amid their efforts to do the right thing. Reimer knew well that he was drawing on the deep and wide evangelical and ecumenical horizon of his faith more than on died-in-the-wool Anabaptist Mennonitism of recent vintage.

Almost two decades ago Stephen Dintaman wrote an article that would ignite a firestorm of reaction, both pro and con. In "The Spiritual Poverty of the Anabaptist Vision,"[3] he argued, perhaps rather one-sidedly, that Mennonites whose faith has been formed in one way or another by Harold Bender's "Anabaptist Vision"[4] have been so focused on ethics, on *doing*, that they have had little to say to the brokenness and sinfulness many of us Mennonites struggle with in our own lives—a brokenness that marks the lives even of those most committed to peacemaking. What Mennonites need to recover, Dintaman argued, is grace, and the work of the restoring and transforming Holy Spirit.

This is an argument Arnold Snyder has been making for decades, as one who during his time with Witness for Peace in Nicaragua struggled with what is needed if one is to love enemies,[5] and also as a historian attempting to understand the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century who took it as a given that what marked the life of the believer was the work of grace, and only then the response in action.[6] Ethicist Ted Koontz echoes Snyder's sense of the priority of grace:

> *I know it is easier to walk as a peacemaker when I know afresh God's graciousness than when I try to do so because I feel I must. For many difficult years I tried to*

be a good Mennonite pacifist, but with very little personal appropriation of God's graciousness. Even though that graciousness has become far more real to me in the last few years, I routinely slip out of living in awareness of it. The weight of being "good"—especially as extremely and oddly "good" as nonresistance expects us to be—is often more than can be sustained by a sense of duty.[7]

Such an understanding represents a profound appreciation for divine pardon, but also for the restoring and transforming work of grace in those who attempt to live their faith.

Others in the Mennonite community come at the theme of grace from a somewhat different, if overlapping vantage point. They have a deep suspicion that our forebears were unrealistic—and perhaps even misguided—in their understanding of discipleship as purity and nonconformity to the world, an understanding that has led to a sometimes disdainful disengagement from the world, and a sometimes oppressive communal life.

Turning from perfectionism

There are varied aspects to how grace relates to this turning from what is often dubbed "perfectionism." For one, I sense that sometimes we're just tired of trying so hard. Even if we try hard—and we do so less and less, to be sure—when we do succeed (or think we have succeeded), we discover that we've blown it by being proud about it. It's much better, much healthier, to make peace with sin. At such times we love to (mis)quote Luther's counsel to "sin boldly."

There are varied aspects to how grace relates to this turning from what is often dubbed perfectionism. Sometimes we're just tired of trying so hard.

Relatedly, the effort to be perfect (even though Jesus demands it explicitly in the Sermon on the Mount [Matt. 5:48]) is perceived as dangerous in that it renders us blind to the degree to which brokenness and sin have taken root even in our piety. Grace is an implicit acknowledgement of our sinfulness. Grace permits an honest appraisal of ourselves as flawed and broken human beings.

Further, since most of us are no longer living separate from the world, we've developed a kind of Niebuhrian appreciation for the

tragic inevitability of moral compromise in this world, even when we're doing the right thing. It is the tragedy of that reality that provides the need for grace. J. Lawrence Burkholder is most often associated with this perspective. His doctoral thesis of the late 1950s argued for a kind of "social responsibility" that is not squeamish about getting one's hands dirty in the course of engagement for justice in the world.

For Burkholder it was a matter of grace as pardon not only for broken individuals but particularly for those who have to work within the structures of this world that make sin inevitable, even when—*especially* when—they are engaged in the practice of love for the neighbour. "What I have looked for," he said in some personal reflections, "is a doctrine of grace that would not only have addressed the problem of personal sins, willfully committed [this is very much Stephen Dintaman's concern mentioned earlier], but also social sins, structurally *necessitated*."[8]

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Today debates rage among Mennonites on such matters as whether Mennonites should not only support policing but be involved in it; whether Mennonites should encourage governments to adopt the doctrine of the responsibility to protect; and what should inform their participation in governmental, business, and organizational systems.

Whenever there is a sense that such engagement implicates us in sin—an implication not all of us grasp, to be sure—grace is welcomed and embraced. But it is grace largely as pardon for the inevitability of sinning.

Suspicious of limiting grace to forgiveness

That is one rather diverse end of the spectrum regarding grace. At the other end, there are also many, or the same ones at different times, who are suspicious of grace, especially if it can no longer be distinguished from moral and spiritual impunity. The great Lutheran Dietrich Bonhoeffer has become virtually an honorary Mennonite for his trenchant critique of "cheap grace" in his *Nachfolge* (published in English as *The Cost of Discipleship*).

We're suspicious of a grace that can too easily provide cover and absolution for unchecked participation in the sinful structures of society, economics, and politics. We're suspicious when grace cuts the prophetic nerve of the church's witness, when it becomes the back door to *not* following Jesus, to *not* taking up the cross.

We're suspicious of a kind of *Gelassenheit*—a favourite word among Anabaptists—that is not so much yieldedness to God and abandonment *to* costly discipleship as it is a complacent abandonment *of* the rigors of faithfulness. We see this as presuming upon grace, and thus devaluing its currency. And here we usually invoke not Lawrence Burkholder but John Howard Yoder.

Grace works

Even if some of us do not speak easily of grace for such reasons, I suspect that all of us in the middle of the night, when obfuscations and delusions have run out of steam, know we are in desperate need of grace. We know we need grace as pardon for personal falleness; too many of us are too fallen to fake it any more.

But pardon, if taken as a given for an unchanged life, betrays grace. If Bonhoeffer knew that, Paul knew it better yet, anticipating the Protestant heresy: "Should we sin that grace might abound? Give me a break!"

We need grace for our churches who are hardly spotless brides (they never were, of course), sullied not because we're getting dirty in the messy messianic business of being Christ in the world but because we're not in that business. Such grace is the equivalent of forgiveness, of pardon.

But pardon is not enough. Pardon, if taken as a given for an unchanged life, betrays that grace. If Bonhoeffer knew that, Paul knew it better yet, anticipating the Protestant heresy: "Should we sin that grace might abound? By no means!" (Rom 6:1–2). Or, as we might translate the Greek quite accurately: "Give me a break!"

Grace is so much more than forgiveness, as the Anabaptists knew well. Interestingly, Paul himself seldom used the word *forgiveness*. Sixteenth-century Anabaptists emphasized grace much more strongly than their offspring have, but less as forgiveness than as empowerment, as transformation, as regeneration.[9]

Their emphasis on *Nachfolge* ("following after," their preferred word for what contemporary Mennonites call "discipleship") was

premised on God's renewing and transforming grace through the work of the Holy Spirit. Discipleship is premised on grace. It is the work of grace. And therein might well lie the point at which Mennonites and Lutherans can together rediscover a deeper and more encompassing understanding of grace.

To make this point as clear as I can, let me return, in conclusion, to the letter of Ephesians. As I pointed out earlier, in the first instance of "By grace you are saved!" (in 2:5) the slogan interrupts a rehearsal of God's loving and gracious liberation of errant humanity. Notice, it is grace that raises the walking dead together with Christ. Grace has to do with resurrection, with letting Easter seep into the way we are to live now in the present, still fallen age. In Romans 6:4 Paul calls this "newness of life."

In the second instance (in 2:8), the slogan "For by grace you have been saved" leads into "and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus *for* good works, which God prepared beforehand for us to walk in" (Eph. 2:8–10). Grace is not a guaranteed absolution from failing at good works, nor are good works the devaluing of grace. Just so, "good works"—discipleship, *Nachfolge*—are not a means of earning our own salvation. Rather, grace comes into its own in rendering us capable of doing the good works God has graciously prepared for us. "Works" are the gift of grace. On Reformation Sunday the Kitchener Mennonite Brethren Church[10] on Ottawa Street had this on their sign: "Grace works." Perfect! Likewise, justification is not simply the *Freispruch*, the pardon of a gracious judge. Justification is God's faithfulness in Jesus at work rendering us capable of *doing* justice (Rom 3:21–26). This is what Paul calls "new creation" (compare 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15).

Just as Paul was exasperated by those who would split grace from good works (see Rom. 6:11), so the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount knew that to demand the rigours of good works, the righteousness that exceeds even that of the Pharisees (Matt. 5:20), required first the Beatitudes, the promise of God's favour, the sun of grace and the rain of mercy.

Mennonites dare not leave grace to the Lutherans, any more than Lutherans should leave discipleship to Mennonites. It is a great gift to us as Mennonites to have sisters and brothers to

remind us that we don't earn our way, that ultimately whatever good we do, we give thanks to the gracious author and finisher of that work.

Notes

[1] *Theodidaktos: Evangelical Mennonite Conference Journal for Theology and Education* published a version of this article (vol. 6, no. 2 [November 2011]: 3–7); it is based on a presentation made on November 26, 2010, at a conference, "Confessing in Faith: Healing between Lutherans and Mennonites," held at Wilfrid Laurier University (Waterloo, Ontario). My conversation partner on that occasion was Robert A. Kelly, professor of systematic theology at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary; his presentation was "A Lutheran on Discipleship." Other presentations from the conference are also available on-line at http://www.emconference.ca/theodidaktos.

[2] A. James Reimer taught religion and theology at Conrad Grebel University, served on the faculty of the Toronto School of Theology, and was director of the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre. He was author of *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Pandora Press, 2001); and *The Dogmatic Imagination: The Dynamics of Christian Belief* (Herald Press, 2003). He died in 2010 of cancer.

[3] Stephen F. Dintaman, "The Spiritual Poverty of the Anabaptist Vision," *Conrad Grebel Review* 10, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 205–8.

[4] Harold S. Bender, as president of the American Society of Church History, published the "The Anabaptist Vision" in 1944, which in many ways determined the direction. See "The Anabaptist Vision," *Church History* 13 (March 1944): 3–24; reprinted in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 18 (April 1944): 67–88.

[5] C. Arnold Snyder, "The Relevance of Anabaptist Nonviolence for Nicaragua Today." *Conrad Grebel Review* 2, no. 2 (Spring 1984): 123–37.

[6] C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1995).

[7] Ted Koontz, "Grace to You and Peace: Nonresistance as Piety," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 69 (July 1995): 354–68, and in *Refocusing a Vision*, edited by John D. Roth (Goshen, IN: Mennonite Historical Society, 1995), 82–96.

[8] Rodney J. Sawatsky and Scott Holland, eds., *The Limits of Perfection: A Conversation with J. Lawrence Burkholder* (Waterloo, ON: Conrad Grebel College, The Institute of Anabaptist and Mennonite Studies, 1993), 50. My italics.

[9] See Thomas N. Finger, "Grace," Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online; http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/G7325ME.html.

[10] One of the remarkable ways Lutheran and Mennonite story lines have intersected in the past is in the Mennonite Brethren part of the Mennonite community of denominations, which owes its beginnings in 1860 in Russia to the work of a Lutheran evangelist, Eduard Wüst.

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