

The Fragility of Grace

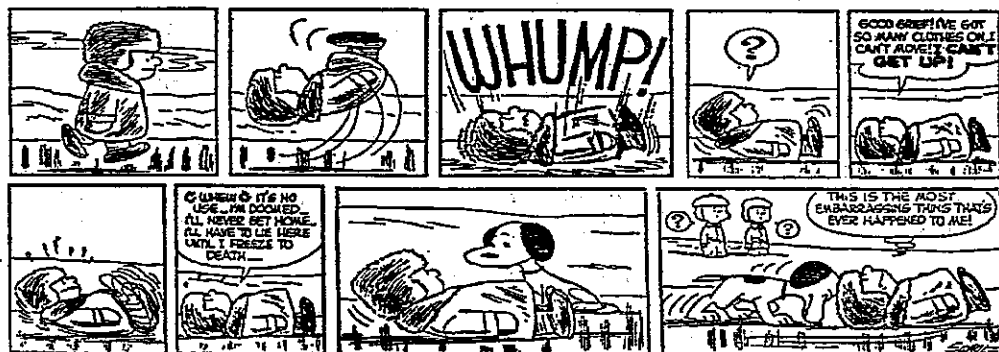
(Inaugural Lecture, Luther Seminary, February 2001)

It is always an honour and a great responsibility to give an inaugural lecture, setting the tone for the coming academic year. Just a few short weeks after accepting the invitation to give the inaugural lecture for the 2001 academic year at Luther Seminary I made a very difficult decision to give notice of my intention to finish teaching here as of mid-year and to trust God that other doors and opportunities would open up. So in a sense, I then found myself presented not only with the challenge of giving a first word of the academic year, but in another sense, also a sort of final word as a lecturer at Luther Seminary. Now the pressure was really on to say something profound. The problem, of course, was that I didn't have anything really profound to say. But as I'm sure my father would remind me, after all the years spent studying and obtaining degrees – certainly I should have something to say. It's a hard point to argue with, but I was still coming up blank. Then the editor of *The Lutheran* wanted advance notice of a topic. Apparently 'to be advised' didn't carry much of a punch, and 'Reflections on God and Life' was simply too non-committal. Then someone suggested to me that in four years at Luther Seminary I must have learned something. Perhaps I could reflect on that. That started me thinking. I have learned many things in four years here. But one thing in particular continued to come to mind, and that was my on-going reflections on the nature of grace. Hence the topic for my talk this morning: The fragility of grace.

My thesis is that grace, although the bedrock of our Christian existence, is a fragile thing that cannot be taken for granted. It is always under threat of being overwhelmed or simply supplanted by the law. Furthermore, I will contend that the fragility of grace is often most acutely experienced precisely among Lutherans – us heirs of the evangelical Reformation who assume that grace is automatically a part of our identity.

The Concept of Grace

But first, just what is grace? There are a variety of theo-technical definitions of grace to be found – but they all strike me as somewhat stifling and graceless themselves. Philip Yancey, in his book, *What's so Amazing about Grace?* gives a lively definition. According to Yancey, 'Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more. ... And grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us less.'¹ Yet the best definition of grace I've ever come across is not a definition at all. In fact, it's not even by a theologian. It's by the cartoonist Charles Schulz.



In the first set of frames we see Charlie Brown walking along on a frozen lake. He suddenly slips and falls. The weight of his winter clothing, much like the weight of our cares and burdens, weigh 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 sins and burdens weigh us down. We simply cannot rescue ourselves. God comes along and rescues us. Sometimes we find it embarrassing because we wanted to believe that we could do it ourselves. Sometimes we don't even seem particularly grateful. Yet God rescues us nonetheless. 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

¹ Philip Yancey, *What's so Amazing about Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 70.

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.'²

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 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.'³ 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].'⁴ Augustine focuses on God's cooperation rather than our own, hence, God 'perfects by His cooperation what He initiates by His operation.'⁴ 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.⁵ 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

² Augustine, *De catechizandis rudibus*, 22.39.

³ Augustine, *Grace and Free Will*, XVII.33.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ See Augustine, *City of God*, XXI.16.

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 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.⁶ 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?'⁷

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 infused, Luther argued, but is not irresistible.⁸ 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 ...'⁹

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.'¹⁰ 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.'¹¹

The Erosion of Grace in the Lutheran Tradition

But as was the case with Augustine, Luther's theological successors soon began to dissect and codify the teaching on grace. In a manner closely paralleling medieval scholasticism, Lutheran orthodoxy distinguished between five different actualisations of grace no less.¹² Some within the tradition began to fear that the capacity to academically describe grace had become more important than the experience of grace.

⁶ 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*).

⁷ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, LW 33:136

⁸ LW 31:99f.

⁹ *Formula of Concord, Solid Dec. II.83*, Tappert, p.537. Cf. also *Solid Dec. II.64*, and *CA XII.7*.

¹⁰ Harold Dittmanson, *Grace in Experience and Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1977), 43f.

¹¹ LW 35:369.

¹² These are: *gratia praeveniens*. (The prevenient grace which must precede repentance); *gratia praeeparans*. (The preparatory grace that shows us our sins and prepares us to accept the gospel); *gratia operans*. (The operating grace of God through which the Holy Spirit actually effects our conversion); *gratia cooperans*. (The grace which allows us to perform good works after we have been converted.); and *gratia conservans*. (The preserving grace through which the Holy Spirit enables us to persevere in the faith).

But our Lutheran heritage is not a neo-scholastic distinction between possible phases of grace – as useful as these may be in academic theological discussions. Our theological heritage is that of a gracious God. Yet I fear we are always on the verge of losing sight of God's grace. This seems to be a particular danger among Lutherans, in part because we usually assume that we know what it means to have a gracious God. Indeed, if any group should be expected to live and act as those graced by God's love and forgiveness, certainly it would be Lutherans. Yet sometimes that which should be most familiar to us is taken for granted and lost sight of.

There is a telling reference to Lutherans in Philip Yancey's book, *What's so Amazing about Grace?* In summarising the story of the novel and film *Babette's Feast*, Yancey writes: 'Babette had landed among the graceless ones. Followers of Luther, they heard sermons on grace nearly every Sunday and the rest of the week tried to earn God's favor with their pieties and renunciations.'¹³

Regrettably, being an orthodox Lutheran is no guarantee of experiencing a gracious God. The German Lutheran theologian Helmut Thielicke saw this clearly when he said to first year theology students: 'Whoever ceases to be a ... [person] of the spirit automatically furthers a false theology, even if in thought it is pure, orthodox and basically Lutheran. ...In that case death lurks in the kettle.'¹⁴

Grace and Law: The Heart of the Problem

Sometimes we are tempted to believe that it is dangerous to speak too freely of God's grace without also speaking of the law. Occasionally I encounter Lutherans who believe that Luther's dialectic of law and gospel is meant as a caution to guard against our getting too carried away with the gospel. That is, with the radical implications of having a gracious God. Now this, of course, is not to say that the law does not have its proper use and function. It is part of the way that God speaks to us. And for the Christian, the law also has a positive teaching role. Yet the law as that which condemns and as that which the Apostle Paul portrays as being in opposition to God's grace is not our friend. It is this law that we must here be concerned with.

At our recent LCA synod in Tanunda the second most unsettling thing I observed as a Lutheran theologian was the argument that the phrase 'gospel-based' be struck from a description of a list of duties of the college of presidents as a potentially dangerous and even antinomian concept in describing how presidents should deal with conflict in the church. Was I hearing correctly? Were we afraid that the instruction to treat pastors and laity in a 'gospel-based' or grace-informed manner was a dangerous encouragement to abandon the proper role of the law? Was the word 'gospel' really being objected to at a gathering of Lutherans? But before I could fully comprehend the implications of what was being said the most troubling thing I have ever observed at a synod of our church occurred. The motion to delete the phrase 'gospel-based' from the description of the duties of presidents was passed!¹⁵ During a break in proceedings I was eager to enquire of a fellow pastor who had voted in favour of the motion as to what his concern was. 'The concept of 'gospel' he informed me, is being much misused today. By reducing everything to the gospel we are in danger of losing sight of the equally important and balancing affirmation of the law. That's why I believe we should never mention the 'gospel' without mentioning the 'law.' After all, that's the whole point of law *and* gospel.'

There is a danger, I believe, that in our efforts to avoid charges like anti-nomianism and the ever-dreaded 'gospel-reductionism' that we have perhaps become all too cosy with the law.

As an aside I must admit that I have always found the accusation of 'gospel-reductionism' as made by one Lutheran against another a curious one. Can we really stress the good news of God's grace too much? But perhaps most ironic is that the charge actually seems to have originated within pre-Vatican II Roman Catholicism as an accusation against Luther and the Lutheran tradition. The Roman Catholic view, according to Hermann Sasse, was that the Lutheran position was 'an untenable simplification, an over-emphasis on a single point of doctrine, an isolation of the Gospel ...' Or as one Roman Catholic writer of the day put it: Luther's Reformation was 'an over-simplification, a reduction...'

¹³ Philip Yancey, *What's so Amazing about Grace?*, 26.

¹⁴ Helmut Thielicke, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*, tr Charles Taylor, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) 36.

¹⁵ The original resolution under section VIII.E, 3.f) read that one of the 'duties of the College of Presidents shall be to give Gospel-based leadership in the resolution of conflict in the Church.' (In: *Christ our Future. Thirteenth General Synod, Regular Convention 2000*, p.3.) The amendment that was passed without vocalised objection deletes the phrase 'Gospel-based' and adds a reference to scripture and the Lutheran Confessions in an earlier section to help avoid the trend toward 'gospel reductionism.' (cf. *Minutes of the Thirteenth General Synod*, p.17)

to the principle of the Gospel. Sasse contended that 'this accusation is directed squarely against the center of the Evangelical Lutheran faith' and that Luther's so-called gospel-reductionism could only be defended by clearly distinguishing between law and gospel – a point we shall take up a bit further on.¹⁶ But for now let me note only that we should not shy away from the Gospel for fear of over-emphasising it. And if, by chance, in our enthusiasm for God's grace we find ourselves charged with 'gospel-reductionism' we should at least know we are in good company.

There is an important point to be made here. The centrality of God's grace has come to be epitomised in the word 'gospel.' If we veer off the course rediscovered by Luther of the centrality of the gospel of God's grace, we run the grave risk of exchanging our birthright for a pot of porridge – of exchanging the transforming grace of God for the entanglements of the law. We have come to see the law, I fear, as a gentle companion, leading us to Christ. But this is far from the biblical image of law. From Paul, the apostle of God's grace, we learn that the law holds us prisoner (Galatians 3:23); it challenges the dependence of our heavenly inheritance on God's promises and grace (Galatians 3:18); the law does not rest on faith but puts those who rely on it under a curse (Galatians 3:10-12); if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing (Galatians 2:21); those who seek justification through the law have fallen from grace (Galatians 5:4); God's righteousness comes to us apart from the law (Romans 3:21); and while the law is added in order that the sin might increase, grace was given in all the more abundance that we might be justified and have eternal life (Romans 5:20, 21). Indeed, as the Apostle states, if Christ has set us free, we are free indeed (Galatians 5:1). Why then should free people in Christ again put on the yoke and burden of the law? Clearly, I do not believe this is what Luther meant by his emphasis on law and gospel.

But what then is the point of 'law and gospel'? It has to do with distinguishing God's work of grace from God's work of law, of God's 'yes' from God's 'no.' It is not meant to restrain the gospel - lest any get too carried away with the power of God's grace. It is meant, rather, to put the law in its proper context and to be certain that we distinguish and do not confuse the gospel with the law. The law dare never be confused with or substituted for the gospel. As the *Formula of Concord* poignantly reminds us when it rejects the injurious teaching 'that the Gospel is properly a preaching of repentance or reproof, and not alone a preaching of grace. For thereby the Gospel is again converted into a law, the merit of Christ and the Holy Scriptures obscured, [and] Christians robbed of true consolation.'¹⁷

But, one might argue; 'Isn't there a danger that we forget the law, that we bring the gospel part of the equation into imbalance if not enough law is proclaimed?' But the law/gospel juxtaposition was never meant to establish equality or balance between the two. The Lutheran catchcry dare not be shortened to a quasi-mathematical equation of 'law and gospel', as if the genius of Luther was to have discovered some equity between the two. No, the fullness of the classic Lutheran distinctive is 'the proper distinction between law and gospel.' Luther was concerned that we are able to tell the difference between the gospel, which should predominate in our teaching, and the law. He was not promoting a sort of reformational principle of yin and yang that held the two in some sort of equal balance as if the gospel could never be proclaimed unless accompanied by an equal measure of law. The great Missouri-Synod theologian C.F.W. Walther made this point very clear when he declared that 'Law and Gospel are confounded and perverted ... not only when the law predominates ... but also when Law and Gospel, as a rule, are equally balanced and the gospel is not predominant'¹⁸ Indeed, how can we speak of an equality between law and gospel where an imbalance already exists.

The law and gospel, it must be said, do not start out on equal footing. The gracious good news of God's love contains a certain fragility that the law does not know. The law is inescapable. In our very being, in our relationships, in all that we do and are, we are reminded of our imperfections and shortcomings. The law, in the sense of that which judges and condemns us, is not our friend. Nor is the law particularly in need of our advocacy. It is doing quite well on its own, thankyou. Grace contrasted with law, is not strong but surprisingly fragile. I am aware of no congregation or community (or even, dare I add, seminary) of which it could be rightly said upon close examination of their life together that they have forgotten the law. To wilfully pretend that it does not exist? Perhaps. To presume that it does not apply to us? Maybe that too. But to forget the law - to show little indication of being people under the law? That is something I've yet to encounter. Grace, on the other hand, is a different story. How quickly grace can be overwhelmed by rules and regulations. By judgments and accusations. By our ever-present tendency to believe the worst of others – and of our own selves.

¹⁶ Cf. Hermann Sasse, *Here We Stand*, tr. Th. Tappert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1938), 113.

¹⁷ *Epitome of the Formula of Concord VI*, antithesis 1. Citation is from Jabobs translation, 508., Cf. Tappert 479.

¹⁸ C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House), thesis xxv, p. 403

Grace may be the foundation upon which the Christian faith is built, but it can never be taken for granted.

Grace and law are indeed two entirely different creatures. Grace sets us free. The law tells us we will never be free. Grace is the fulfilment of all God's promises. The law makes promises it cannot keep. Grace lightens our burden. The law tells us we must bear still more. Grace assures us that God loves us. The law tells us that we can never be sure of God's love. Grace allows us to say 'sorry.' The law tells us the offending party has not yet made enough restitution. Grace allows us to accept the forgiveness of others. The law tells us we are unworthy of forgiveness. Grace is always in danger of being an exile in its own home. The law is the ever-present uninvited guest, knocking at the door of our hearts.

A Gracious God

Grace, taken seriously, is a radical concept. It is capable of turning the world upside down. It transforms the way we view ourselves and the way we treat one another. Grace also transforms our image of God. Luther spent his life searching for a gracious God. Yet sadly, many of us at times seem to believe in a pre-gracious God.

So what does a gracious God look like? It is not, I believe, the God that Jonathan Edwards proclaimed in his famous sermon, 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.' (8 July 1741). Hear the words of Edwards, and remember that this sermon has been praised as one of the most famous evangelistic (that is, Gospel-proclaiming) sermons in the history of the church.

The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string; and justice directs the bow to your heart, and strains at the bow: and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God, without promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood. Thus all you that never passed under a great change of heart, by the mighty power of the Spirit of God ... however you may have reformed your life in many things and may have had religious affections, and may keep up a form of religion in your families and closets, and in the house of God, it is nothing but his mere pleasure that keeps you from being this moment swallowed up in everlasting destruction. ... The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much in the same way as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over a fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: His wrath toward you burns like fire; He looks upon you as worthy of nothing else but to be cast into the fire; He is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in His sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in His eyes than the most venomous serpent is in ours.¹⁹

This God, I concede, may well provoke enough fear and terror to move people to do whatever is necessary to avoid his wrath – but it is not the God who took on human flesh and died for our sins. It is not the God who chooses us before we choose him. It is not the God who bids us love one another, and it is most certainly not the gracious God that Luther found. In short, it is not the God of grace but a god of law created to terrorise.

This god we must contrast with the gracious God that Luther rediscovered, a God who says, in the words of Luther: 'I am not angry, I do not want to punish, I do not want you to die, I want to pardon, I want to spare.'²⁰

We may recoil at the abrasiveness of Edward's rhetoric – surely done in the name of upholding the righteousness and justice of God. But how often are we guilty of similar misrepresentation – albeit in more subtle forms?

But surely we would never do such a thing. Yet we are all at times guilty. We proclaim something other than a gracious God every time we seek to persuade ourselves and others that God will not be pleased with us, may even reject us, if we use the wrong sort of worship order, leave out some critical part of the communion liturgy, stand in the wrong place or face the wrong direction when leading in worship, have a defective doctrine of the ministry, etc. And when we react with righteous indignation against those who so terrorise the consciences of God's people and proclaim that they will surely have

¹⁹ Jonathan Edwards, 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God' a sermon of 8 July, 1741, in: *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, ed. Edeard Hickman (Banner of Truth Trust, 1988), 7ff.

²⁰ *Bondage of the Will*, LW 33:136f.

to give account of their actions, then we too join them in the dock – guilty of having also forgotten that we have a gracious God.

Each of us is in need of hearing again the admonition of Luther to his friend Philip Melancthon: 'If you are a preacher of grace, preach not feigned but real grace!'²¹ And might we also say, to those of us involved in the process of theological education at this institution, if you are going to teach grace, teach real grace! And if you are going to learn grace, learn real grace! May we be called again to recover Luther's understanding of adiaphora. To not make differences in taste and culture with regard to our liturgical practices conscience-burdening divisions among us. Luther loved the traditional forms of worship found in the Western church, but he did not want his followers to bind themselves to an inflexible liturgical form – especially one of his own making. Hence in the introduction to his German Mass Luther warns: 'Do not make it a rigid law to bind or entangle anyone's conscience, but use it in Christian liberty for as long, when, where, and however you find it to be practical and useful.'²² And when we confront issues that go beyond adiaphora – issues that we feel strike at the very heart of the gospel of God's grace – as surely we will - may we approach them in all prayerfulness and earnestness, knowing that we have a gracious God – and not one waiting to condemn us if we come down on 'the wrong side of the issue.' I can do no better at this point than to repeat the words of Helmut Thielicke who once told a group of new theology students: 'I don't believe God is a fussy faultfinder in dealing with theological ideas. He who provides forgiveness for a sinful life will also surely be a generous judge of theological reflections. Even an orthodox theologian can be spiritually dead, while perhaps a heretic crawls on forbidden bypaths to the sources of life.'²³

The point is, whether we want a gracious God or not – we do have a gracious God. A God who pardons when we would say 'condemn'. A God who gives another chance when we would say 'enough'. A God who says, 'set them free' when we would say 'lock them up!' In short, a God who shocks our fallen and distorted sense of justice by treating us very differently than we would treat others. Grace may be fragile, but it is not without an incomparable power of its own.

I will conclude, if you permit, by citing the words of the former slave trader John Newton. Words whose meaning I am only now beginning to appreciate.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed!

Through many dangers, toils, and snares
I have already come;
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

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²¹ Letter of 1 August 1521, cited in Heinrich Hermelink, 'Grace in the Theology of the Reformers,' in *The Doctrine of Grace*, ed. W. Whitley, 1932.

²² Luther, 'The German Mass and Order of Service,' *LW* 53:61.

²³ Helmut Thielicke, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*, tr Charles Taylor, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) 37.