

Grace and Freedom: an Anabaptist Perspective

The tension between human freedom and the grace of God is one of the most classic of problems of Christian theology. The problem appears expressly in the disputation between Augustine of Hippo and Pelagius, and is still alive in our own time, posed at times in the same terms as it first appeared. In this text we will try to ask ourselves what might be the specific contribution of an Anabaptist perspective in this discussion.

Introduction

The starting point for the problem may be situated in the unequivocal Biblical affirmation that salvation is an unmerited gift of God, and that precisely for this reason it is freely given. If salvation were relative to our own merits, then grace would no longer be grace, but rather the reward for our efforts (Ro 11:6). It is not the case, as is sometimes stated, that an emphasis on the sovereignty of grace is to be found exclusively in Paul. It is to be found in the different strata of the Old and New Testaments, and not only in one author (Dt 7:6-8; Jn 1:14-17; Ac 4:33; etc.). However, alongside of such clear affirmations of the sovereignty of God, the presence of many Biblical texts in which human freedom and responsibility is underlined must also be taken into account. That freedom is, from the Biblical point of view, an essential characteristic of what it is to be human, which is appealed to frequently when different Biblical authors, including Paul himself, exhort us to take our own salvation seriously (Ph 2:12). We could say the problem of grace and liberty arises as a problem of Biblical hermeneutics, where the need arises to accept concurrently (i.e., “canonically”) texts which appear to be in contradiction with each other.

The alleged contradiction would reside in that any role which human liberty may be granted in the process of salvation, automatically implies the denial of its absolutely gracious character. Conversely, the affirmation of the gratuity of salvation would seem to deny implicitly the possibility that any free human act could be regarded as merit towards its advancement. In Augustine’s day an alternative of sorts to Pelagianism was tendered by some, known as Semipelagianism. According to this theological position, the whole process of salvation is free, with the sole exception of one first step. God only saves those who in some manner or another accept salvation, and it is this acceptance which would be seen as a free human act, one which cannot be attributed directly to God. Thus, the smallest of openings would still remain in place for a role for human freedom in the process of salvation. However, that free act of ours would in effect function as our own merit, and therefore not a gracious act if God; with the result that grace would lose—at least in part—its character as grace. As is well known, Semipelagianism was rejected by the Church of old, and on the whole Augustine’s opinion prevailed, wherein he in-

sisted in attributing to God all possible merit accruing to salvation, including that “first step” whereby grace is accepted.¹

The Church of old, however, took pains to avoid the extreme consequences which could be derived from Augustine’s emphasis on predestination. Because if God is the only author of our salvation, it would seem that God has decided beforehand who shall be saved and who not. Before human sin, and even before Creation, a double predestination could be in effect. From eternity God would have sovereignly destined some to salvation, others to perdition.² This cannot mean that God is unjust: sin is a human universal, and God’s mercy with some sinners is not God owes anyone. If it were something owed, then it would no longer be free, and grace would no longer be grace. It is not at all clear that this is in fact a doctrine which Augustine himself held, but it is certainly to be considered typical of a theological tradition which appeals to Augustine. Undoubtedly the notion of a “double predestination” has its appeal as an explanation of the presence of evil in the world, and the apparent limits of the grace of God. How is it possible that an all powerful God countenance all the injury human beings inflict upon each other? The idea of a free pardon, but one limited to just a few chosen ones, could seem to suggest an answer regarding the patience God shows in the face of evil. However the doctrine of double predestination, taken to its ultimate consequences, becomes totally independent of human conduct. Predestination would thus in the final analysis only apply to the realm of personal certainty of faith, and not to human conduct as such, since as a matter of fact our conduct becomes irrelevant in the face of the eternal decrees of God. If it *were* relevant, then grace would no longer be grace. In this way is salvation severed from human conduct, and from those very real situations of suffering, injustice, and oppression which our world experiences.

Here again we come face to face with a similar hermeneutical problem: on the one hand, there would appear to be Biblical texts where the sovereignty of God’s election is clearly affirmed, including the fact that God hardens the heart of those who then oppose him (Ex 9:12); at the same time, other texts unequivocally proclaim the divine will to save all of humankind (1 Ti 2:4)³ From the point of view of the affirmation of human freedom, it could be thought that there is, at God’s initiative, a universal offer of salvation, whereas the acceptance of this offer depends upon the freedom of each person. Thus would the will for universal salvation be safeguarded, on God’s account, while at the same time allowance is made for human freedom.

¹ Cf. Augustine of Hippo, *De gratia et libero arbitrio*, 15. This is not to say that Augustine denied human freedom. Augustine agreed that no one is saved against their will: “Not God’s grace alone, nor he alone, but God’s grace *with* him,” cf. *De gratia et libero arbitrio*, 5.

² The Council of Arles of 743 pronounced itself against the extreme followers of Augustine (Faustus, Lucidius), who apparently defended double predestination.

³ En the Exodus texts, it is interesting to observe how at times it is God who hardens Pharaoh’s heart, while at other times it is Pharaoh who hardens his own heart (Ex 8:28). It is as if, narratively speaking, the theological problem of “divine cooperation” with human will were being posed.

The need for missions would also be explained in this way, since it would seem to be the intermediation required in order for God's free offer to become available to all humankind. However at this point we arrive again at the problem posed from the very beginning. That is, if salvation in any way depends upon human activity, we once again discover that grace is no longer fully gracious, but can in some measure be attributed to our merits.

As is well known, these discussions reappear time and again in the history of theology. They appeared with a vengeance during the 16th Century, when the great Reformers took up once more the Augustinian position, with all its consequences. Zwingli based his idea of predestination on the absolute Providence of God concerning everything that happens in the world, whereas Calvin thought of predestination as an underpinning for the doctrine of justification and an underpinning for ecclesiology. Nevertheless, their emphases on the sovereignty of God are clear: predestination is not just the fact that God knows beforehand what it is that human beings will do (and therefore what merit will eventually accrue to their works), but rather it is the eternal decree of God whereby it is already decided what it is that God will do with each individual human person, independently of their works. Obviously, this implies a "double predestination."⁴ An it also implies that predestination, insofar as it is an underpinning for ecclesiology, is destined to predicate a difference between the church visible and the church invisible, since predestination is in the final analysis independent of the works that each one performs. Luther's positions were not all that different at first, but Melancton and other followers moderated some of his more radical theses, underlining that a human being is not a piece of wood or stone, but is at least free to not reject or resist the Word of God.⁵ Thus did the emphasis on predestination in the end become most closely associated with the Reformed tradition, within which, however, the dissidence of Arminius appeared, who did not accept that double predestination could be compatible with the justice of God, nor that the death of Christ can have only been on behalf of the chosen ones, rather than on behalf of all mankind. And so it is that down to our own day, it is customary to divide the Evangelical camp between "Calvinists" and "Arminianists," whereby it is implied that no other possibilities exist beyond these two positions.

En the Catholic camp, the discussion was posed in the famed polemic *de auxiliis*, between Dominicans and Jesuits. Whereas the Dominicans, with Báñez at the forefront, insisted on the sovereignty of God, without which nothing at all happens in the world, the Jesuits, represented by Luis de Molina, tried to reconcile grace and free will. Molina defended the notion, which would reappear later in the theology of Rahner, that there has never existed a purely natural being, but that grace accompanied humankind from the very beginning. Thus Molina could affirm that what humanity lost with the Fall was not freedom, but rather the supernatural assistance

⁴ Cf. Calvin, *Institutions of Christian Religion*, III, 21-24.

⁵ Cf. Ph. Melancton, *Loci communes rerum theologicarum*, 60.

which was initially available. At present, it is impossible for us to believe without God's assistance, yet that assistance if available for all humankind in the form of "prevenient grace" which is given to anyone who does everything within reach to believe and to forsake sin. Though the Jesuit position came within a hairbreadth of being condemned by the pope, a "political" decision was in the end taken, forbidding Dominicans and Jesuits from accusing each other of heresy, and demanding that any writing concerning grace be thenceforth reviewed by the Inquisition prior to publication. This didn't totally do away with the polemics, which ran on for several centuries, and once again flared up when Cornelius Jansenius defended the irresistible and infallible character of the grace of God, formulating a Catholic version of the doctrine of "double predestination." In this case, the Jesuits were able to have their view prevail officially against Jansenism.

It is not only a matter of classic theological positions. It could be said that the Enlightenment, in general, stressed human freedom, and therefore distanced itself from all emphasis on the sovereignty of God. From the Enlightenment point of view, a God who bypasses human freedom would amount to a God who ignores our ultimate personal dignity. Nothing is further from the liberal mindset than the notion of a God who deals with human beings as puppets, ignoring their liberty. Nothing is further from the spirit of the Enlightenment than the resort to God to explain our own moral failures⁶. Certainly, the Enlightenment point of view ties in with a number of foundational Bible truths, such as the idea that it has been God's desire, from the very beginning, to relate freely with free human beings, even at the expense of God's own freedom, and in spite of possible negative consequences. However there is another aspect of the Enlightenment understanding of humanity which does not tie in so easily with Biblical understandings. I am thinking of the individualism inherent in an understanding of humanity wherein one can only be fully human insofar as one is beholden to no one, so that everything can be attributed to oneself. This is far indeed from the Biblical notion of the humanity as created (Ps 100:3). The ideal of the "self-made" human person continues to be part of our culture, both in modern and in post-modern shapes, and in good measure, of its "inhumanity" as well. To be beholden to no one, to be self-made, to be answerable only to one's self, are blueprints for an individualism which is bound to become ever more indifferent to the neighbour's suffering, regarded as self-inflicted. It is characteristic of our individualistic culture, that we understand victims to always be in some measure guilty of their own misfortune. This, by extension, allows us to be indifferent to the hardship others must face. The self-made human is an *homo incurvatus in se ipsum*, a man coiled in upon himself, which is how Luther defined the essence of sinfulness. This is a human being rendered incapable of feeling, or of valuing that which can not be measured in terms of human merit, or, in the final analysis, in terms of economics.

⁶ This can be seen, for instance, in I. Kant, "Der Streit der Faultäten," in his *Werke* (ed. W: Weischedel), vol. XI, p. 337, where he is of the opinion that the Pauline doctrine of election implicitly predestines people as yet unborn to damnation, and is therefore contrary to reason, and as such simply a matter of error on Paul's part.

Karl Barth's prophetic protest against liberal theology had to pose anew the problem of grace. In Barth we undoubtedly have the doctrine of "double predestination," but with a radically different shape from that which it had with his Reformed predecessors. Double predestination would now be present in that God chose God's self in Christ for condemnation, and thereby at the same time chose sinful humankind for blessing in Christ, and for eternal life⁷. This of course poses the question of the universality of salvation, which Barth preferred to leave in the air. At any rate, this original way of understanding the sovereignty of God does leave room for the free response of the human being. Not that the human being need obey the will of God in order to be saved, but that it is possible to obey the will of God *because* he or she has been saved. For this reason, the Barthian emphasis on the sovereignty of God does not imply a lack of interest in the consequences of that sovereignty for concrete human conduct, including political conduct. It is interesting to note that some of Barth's disciples, such as Bonhoeffer, were to face the problem posed by what ever since then has been described as "cheap grace." Thus we have the affirmation that the free grace of God does not imply, as Bonhoeffer underlines time and again, that God considers human praxis unimportant. Quite the contrary, gratitude is bound to be oriented precisely toward making a different human praxis possible, according to the postulates of the Sermon on the Mount. This indicates the arrival, on the scene of contemporary theology, of the possibility of posing the problem of freedom and grace in new shapes, which are not necessarily exclusive. It no longer seems tenable to continue thinking that the only two possible positions are those traditionally known as "Calvinism" and "Arminianism."

The Anabaptist perspective

Consideration of the problem of grace and freedom "from an Anabaptist perspective" does not necessarily imply doing so from a "denominational" angle, at least not in the usual sense of the term. We do not intend at this juncture to mine the writings of certain personalities from the foundational period, from which a specific way of understanding Christian faith might be derived. What we want to say about the relationship between grace and freedom is something which does not belong exclusively to any particular family of churches, but rather, it can be appropriated by any Christian group, within any ecclesial tradition. But in that case, what do we mean by "an Anabaptist perspective"? We mean that our starting point will be the practical experience of the Anabaptist churches of the 16th Century, and from there we will try to understand adequately the relationship between grace and liberty. The radicalism which was the mark of the Anabaptist churches forced them to struggle with the Biblical text from the stance of obedience, where what was foremost in their minds was not the search for a systematically coherent doctrine, but rather the living experience and the application of what the Anabaptists found in Scripture, without needing to undergo a prior process of development of a complete corpus of doctrine⁸.

⁷ Cf. K. Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, II, 2, Zollikon-Zurich, 1948, pp. 101-214.

Regarding the relationship between grace and freedom, it must be pointed out that the first Anabaptists had a strong sense of the sovereignty of the grace of God, made concrete in the experience of calling or vocation. Anabaptists, by establishing believers' churches, broke in practice with the equation between church and society which had been current in Europe since the time of the "Constantinian shift." The rejection of infant baptism implied the acceptance that, as a matter of fact, not all persons born in a certain territory were members of the church of Christ. To be a member of that church is something which, from an Anabaptist perspective, can only be explained given the sovereignty of a God who freely calls God's chosen and gathers them to become part of the family of God's sons and daughters. To belong to such a family was not something which, in the 16th Century, would bring social advantage to the Anabaptists, but rather persecution and death. To become a member of this kind of church is something that could only be explained with a strict understanding of calling. The basis for belonging to such a body of believers, hated and persecuted by the social setting, was God's call, not the interests or preferences of the individual⁹. Consequently, the existence of a body of believers which was distinct from its social context, was due to election. There was no need to explain the continuity between election and a community of believers. The Anabaptists felt no need to detach the concept of election as something which happens in an entirely private realm, quite separate from the body of the church. Nor was it necessary to postulate an invisible church composed of those who are secretly elected by God. Anabaptist ecclesiology was directly linked to their doctrine of grace, because in essence, free election by the grace of God found concrete expression in the existence of a people graciously brought together by God.

This continuity between the doctrine of election and ecclesiology inevitably means that in Anabaptist practice there was a significant emphasis on the freedom and responsibility of believers. Certainly, Anabaptists accepted the Evangelical doctrine of justification by faith alone. However, they never felt comfortable with the notion that faith alone should rationalize an abiding theological indifference concerning the moral praxis of believers. The free grace of God, God's gracious election, could in no way be interpreted as equivalent to the notion that whoever is chosen by God may thenceforth be considered to be "saved," while their actual conduct from then on is rendered a matter of absolute indifference. Quite the contrary, Anabaptists emphasized the idea that the conduct of those who are saved must match the parameters found in the Sermon on the Mount, including love of enemies and non-violent response in the face of evil. Whereas Catholics considered the practices taught in the Sermon on the Mount to be optional, and specifically relegated them to the monastic life; and whereas some Protestants underlined the notion that the only purpose for such a radical re-framing of the Law is to show us our own sinfulness so that we surrender entirely to the saving graciousness of God, the Anabaptists

⁸ An overview of some of the interpretations of the Anabaptist theory of grace can be seen in R. Friedmann, *Teología del anabautismo*, Bogotá, 1998, pp. 60-74.

⁹ You may refer to W. Klassen, *Selecciones teológicas anabautistas*, Guatemala, 1985, pp. 73-87.

considered the Sermon on the Mount to be the foundational charter of the Church, and that as such, it described that conduct which is appropriate for believers. To follow Christ was an essential aspect of salvation, not of course as a means to obtain it through our own efforts, but most assuredly as an expression of the active operation of the grace of God within us. Therein lies the importance of calling others to follow Christ, and consequently a missions emphasis, which was normally overlooked by 16th Century Protestants.

In fact, while Anabaptist ecclesiology underlined, on the one hand, the free election by God, on the other hand, in that ecclesiology the free and responsible response of the human person—who chose to belong to a community in which a conduct was expected from him or her which was radically different from the world's—becomes visible in stark relief. At bottom, believers' baptism fits together both these emphases which are characteristic of the Anabaptist vision: on the one hand, believers' baptism refers unequivocally to the fact that a person, in their adult and conscious life, are capable of experiencing an absolutely personal and unique encounter with God. That particularity of experience points obviously to an emphasis on the free election by God, who calls God's own to God's self at a specific and particular moment in each one's personal biography. Not everyone has faith (2 Th 3:2). Yet, on the other hand, believers' baptism at the same time emphasizes the free and adult decision of the person, who in an adult and responsible manner decides, at a particular moment in his or her life, to follow the Lord and live according to the Lord's commandments. Believers' baptism seals the freedom of the Christian to choose to belong to the community of the Messiah. The sovereign grace of God, the particularity of God's call, and the free response of the human being, are thus tightly bound together in believers' baptism, as a sign of a new personal practice, and as a badge of a free church, composed of believers.

The Anabaptist perspective, thus understood, could not fit into the traditional patterns of posing the option between grace and freedom. In the experience of the first Anabaptist there is a sovereign grace of God which is not experienced as incompatible with, but rather as directly linked to the freedom and responsibility of believers. In fact, the first Anabaptists did not use the term "grace" to refer exclusively to the forgiveness of sinners. They felt grace was already present in the power of God which is active since the creation of the world, and in all God's works of salvation. Grace, therefore, could not be only a "forensic" remission of an individual's guilt, but must include that power which enables believers to lead renewed lives. It is something which goes beyond the standard alternatives between "Calvinists" and "Arminianists," and requires a different conceptualization, one which is fortunately sustained by many recent developments in exegesis and theology.

What is grace?

We may say that one important development in contemporary exegesis and theology is that it is open to the possibility of new perspectives for defining grace. In traditional Catholic theology, grace tended to be conceived of as a divine effluvium,

with a certain tendency to reify it in the theology of the sacraments, where grace was even expressly called *res*, that is, "a thing." In Protestant theology a courtroom conception of grace was prevalent, with a tendency to being associated with the very decrees of God, especially in the sense of legal dispositions where unmerited forgiveness is expressed. Understood in these ways, grace remains outside of the human being, or is at least alien to his or her freedom. Either grace is something which is reified in the sacraments, operational by virtue of their intrinsic efficacy, and independent of human freedom; or else grace is a solemn and definitive decree of God, rendering the human being essentially speechless. Still, these are concepts which have little or nothing to do with such Biblical concepts as *hesed* (loving-kindness) or *hen* (unmerited favor). Contemporary exegesis has opened up the possibility of understanding grace not so much as a thing nor as a judicial decree, but primarily as a merciful *relationship* with God, which finds expression in the covenant God establishes with God's people, and in God's constant tendency to show favor and forgiveness to Israel.

If grace is primarily a relationship which God establishes with God's creatures and most specifically with God's people, it would seem that in that grace there will be room for freedom, not only freedom for God who must take the initiative in this relationship, but also for the human being who God treats as a responsible and free entity. God not only appears in Scripture to respect human freedom, but even to respect the most negative and terrible decisions which issue from it. God appears as someone in whose relationship of grace with Israel the freedom of God's people belongs intrinsically. God does not wish to relate with Israel in such a way as to void Israel's freedom. Were it to come to that, it would be incompatible with God's love. For God to love a people, is to desire that same people to love God freely in return. In a relationship of love, it serves no purpose to void the other's freedom, since in that case love is no longer love, but becomes tyranny. Love cannot be forced, because in that very violence would be the end of love. Any true lover desires the loved one to respond freely with love. Any other possibility would involve the destruction of a relationship of love. Precisely for this reason, grace as a free relationship between God and God's people not only respects Israel's freedom, but actually seeks to enhance it. God desires a people who respond freely. For this reason the true quality of the grace of God is seen not in punishment, but in forgiveness. A forgiveness which is unmerited, gracious, generous, bountiful. But it must be a forgiveness which in no way voids the freedom of the human being nor the possibility that he or she might again turn away from God, because it is of God's very essence that God wishes to be a partner in a free relationship, that God desires the freedom of God's beloved people.

This desire for freedom already shows us one very special aspect of grace, which is that it is frequently manifested as *liberation*. The grace of God is not just an abstract forgiveness, which does not take sin into account. The very graciousness of the love of God is manifested in that God must often liberate God's people from the consequences of sin. These are not abstract consequences, but very concrete situations of

social, political and economic oppression. Liberation theology has brought this essential aspect of the gracious action of God to the forefront. It behooves us to take notice of this, because it brings into perspective the fact that grace is not primarily opposed to freedom, but rather, quite contrarily, the grace of God most specifically results in liberation. This is something very different from what results when the matter is posed in the traditional theological disputes. Here we have another very important dimension which is directly connected to the theology of grace. And it is the fact that Scripture does not unilaterally esteem oppression to be something which the oppressed have necessarily deserved. The freedom and responsibility of the oppressor is at all times taken into account, even when the oppressor (Assyria, Babylon) is seen to be executing God's judgment. Not only that, in the specific case of the Exodus, which is foundational for the faith of Israel, the oppression of the Egyptians over the Israelites is not blamed on a previous action of the Israelites, but solely on the will of the Egyptians to oppress. Which is to say that already in the Old Testament the thesis that victims are not necessarily deserving of their situation begins to be stated forcefully, a message which is reflected on more fully in the book of Job, and which comes to its fullest expression in the cross of Christ.¹⁰

Not only that. Contemporary theology has called our attention to another essential aspect of grace. Grace is not only a liberating relationship, but it is also "self-communication" (*Selbstmitteilung*) of God's self.¹¹ Grace, seen as a liberating relationship, does not leave God "above" and the human being "below," severed from each other. It is God's own desire to draw near to the human being, and to do so in such a way that God gives God's self personally to humankind. This is something which is already apparent when God leads God's people out of slavery not only out of mercy toward the oppressed, but also in order dwell among them (Ex 29:46). Divine liberation comes to a head in the constitution of a people in the midst of which the liberating reality of God can become visible. This presence of God in the midst of God's people comes into full bloom in the New Testament conviction that God was in Christ reconciling the world to God's self (2 Co 5:19). Here we are speaking of a love which is not only a relationship, or of a relationship which has acquired a very special character. Because in this relationship God surrenders God's very self, personally, to the humanity in Christ. This is love, not only as relationship, but as personal surrender. This is precisely what we are attempting to express when we describe Jesus as the Word of God. To call Jesus the Word of God means to understand that God's communication with humankind goes way beyond the revelation of a message, to the extreme of becoming an act of personal surrender. A personal surrender which, as we know, in Jesus finds its most extreme expression in that God becomes present in what to all appearances would seem to be most far removed from God: in suffering, in humiliation, in powerlessness, in death.

¹⁰ I have made this point more fully in my *Teología de la praxis evangélica*, Santander, 1999.

¹¹ This is something which appears very explicitly in contemporary German theology, especially with theologians such as K. Rahner, W. Pannenberg, or E. Jüngel. Above all it is visible, of course, in the teaching of K. Barth.

It is evident that grace thus acquires a very different meaning. Because grace is no longer a relationship which to a certain degree remains outside of God's self. Grace is God's own self, communicating God's self to God's creatures, and most expressly surrendering God's self to God's people. We have obviously arrived at a concept of grace which cannot be expressed in merely "monotheistic" language, with an affirmation of the existence of a God who eventually comes into relationship with God's creatures. This concept of grace can only be expressed in Trinitarian form. The theology of grace is inseparable from the theology of the Trinity. The reason for this is that God's self-communication, understood as self-surrender, includes the affirmation of the Trinitarian presence of God in Jesus, and the affirmation of the presence of this same God in that Spirit who enables us to call God "Abba, Father," just as Jesus himself did (Ga 4:6). Grace now takes on the form of God's self sweeping us into this relationship of God within God. Grace, far from being a sort of divine effluvium, or an eternal decree of God, is actually God's own self taking us into God's own Trinitarian life. The rediscovery of the Spirit in Western theology, not only through the influx of Orthodox theology in the course of the 20th Century, but also with the development of Charismatic and Pentecostal tendencies in the midst of the people of God, opens important possibilities for understanding the grace of God in new ways. A grace which is no longer outside of God, but is now understood as God's own self being surrendered for us and including us in God's own Trinitarian communion.

What is freedom?

We need to realize that here we have significant perspectives from which to understand freedom as well. Where the Spirit of God is, there freedom is (2 Co 3:17). But, what is the freedom we are speaking of? Classic theology conceived of freedom along the usual philosophical categories, understanding freedom as one of a number of capacities among specifically human qualities, normally in conjunction with rationality, and derived from it. To be free was the human potential to not be ruled by natural appetites, but by rationality. And rationality is to be found in discovering the good as the natural object of the will. From where arises the human capacity to avoid the influence of external circumstances, which normally touch upon our natural appetites, and instead choose rationally between the possibilities offered.¹² It is from this freedom, so conceived, that considerations were outlined about the human potential for choosing in favor of one's own salvation, or about the need of divine assistance in order to receive salvation. It is this freedom which was normally spoken of when considerations were outlined concerning its compatibility with the grace of God: if humans could choose salvation it was to their merit, therefore not by the grace of God. Because in the final analysis such a choice was nothing other than the exercise of the natural capacities humans are endowed with, and therefore the merit is human and not divine.

¹² This is a commonplace which we find, variously nuanced, in authors as diverse as Thomas Aquinas (*Summa theologica*, I, q. 83, a. 1) or Kant (*Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, A 52-53).

Things are fortunately not quite that simple, and a theology of Creation rapidly brings this into relief. Let us consider, on the one hand, the meaning that the story of the sin of Adam and Eve holds for understanding human freedom. I understand that this Biblical story speaks of "Adam," that is, of each and every human being, not only the first of the species. This story shows us a God who is willing to accept the most tragic consequences of human liberty, even when those consequences imply a change in God's plans for Creation. Because, in the Biblical perspective, human sin impinges upon the goodness of the whole of Creation, which is thenceforth altered by human violence, by blood shed upon the earth, by the human frenzy to produce without rest even to the point of destroying the natural environment, by the manipulation of religious feeling in the eagerness to obtain productive results, by human claims of power which when brought to fruition, result in the desolate ruins of their successive imperial constructions (Gn 3-11). God's Creation is impinged upon by human sin. We thus read the terrible utterance where God states God repents of having created human beings (Gn 6:6). And yet, God *still* does not cancel human freedom. And this brings into relief an essential aspect of that freedom. Which is that freedom is for God the highest good in all of Creation, or at least one of the aspects of that highest good. Even to the point that God prefers human freedom over and above any of the other good things in Creation which that freedom destroys in its pretentious self-justification. Freedom is not simply one among many capacities present in human beings. Rather, it is the highest good in all of Creation.¹³

There is another essential aspect to freedom, which may be understood from the perspective of human mortality. In classical dogmatics it used to be said that humanity was immortal upon creation, then became mortal due to the sin of Adam and Eve. However, from an exegetical point of view, this affirmation poses a number of difficulties. When Paul affirms that through one person death entered the world (Ro 5:12), he is not referring simply to the chronological end of life, but rather to death as a power which is opposed to God, and which governs human beings. Actually, Paul appears to affirm the mortal character of humankind ever since Creation (1 Co 15:44-50), and in the first letter to Timothy we read that God alone possesses immortality within God's self (1 Ti 6:16). The affirmation in Genesis that *on the very day* that Adam eat of the forbidden tree he would die (Gn 2:17) implies a threat of *immediate* punishment upon the transgressor, a punishment which, however, is then not carried out because of God's mercy, which is something the text stresses repeatedly (Gn 3:21; 4:15). The death which Adam finds himself facing is not simply biological death, but death as the ultimate result of a lifelong dedication to the production of results, and ultimately utterly lacking in meaning. Now all of this bears upon the matter of freedom. Because if humankind is mortal by virtue of creation itself, then freedom has a very special character. In that case freedom is not in the first instance the capacity to always decide otherwise, changing our decisions indefinitely, indefinitely trying the entirety of possibilities, but without any of these choices being final. For a mortal being, freedom is the possibility of making final

¹³ Cf. X. Zubiri, *El problema teológico del hombre: cristianismo*, Madrid, 1997, pp. 215-220.

decisions, unto death. Paradoxically, this freedom brings us into very close proximity with—“in the image of”—God’s own freedom. Because eternity is not just a very long time, but rather the absence of time. In an eternal being, everything is final, even though we are unable to speak of that eternity otherwise than with necessarily time-bound language. Human beings, made in the image and likeness of God, are capable not only of changing their decisions, therefore capable of repentance. Human beings are also capable of making final decisions, decisions which are, in that sense, “eternal.” So freedom is not just one among the many capacities present in human beings, but rather it is that supreme good which makes us capable of making final decisions, even final decisions contrary to God.

Of course, that freedom acquires a new dimension when it is seen as the work of the Spirit of God in us. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, freedom is there. Clearly then, grace cannot be something which is contrary to freedom. Just the opposite is the case: grace empowers freedom. Life in the Spirit is a life free of Adam-claims to attain self-justification by the fruit of our own actions, by means of the tree of good and evil. Life in the Spirit is therefore a life free of those powers which, though arising from human freedom, yet enslave and subject humanity. A life free of the need to attain self-justification through the result of one’s own actions. A life free of the need to compete with others according to the measure of what each might come to possess. A life free of the need to use others or be used by others in order to obtain results. A life free of the fear of a premature death which might stand in the way of attaining those results hoped for in life. A life which is no longer subject to the fear of death, where death is yet the only thing which results from the Adam-claim of self-justification through the fruit of one’s own actions. A life free of the need to cower in fear of a God who is perceived to be the ultimate judge of our accomplishments. A life free of the need to manipulate truth in order to keep from viewing our own nakedness. The grace of God, understood as God surrendering God’s self to us in the Spirit of God, is the realized potential of a life lived in the truth and in freedom, as first-fruits of a restored Creation.

In the end there is no contradiction between grace and freedom. Life in the Spirit is life under the graciousness of God. A life where justification is received by faith, not as a result of our own actions. But then, and only then, it is a life liberated from the deadliest dimensions of Adam, able to do good in an entirely new way. Good is no longer the fulfillment of a norm which makes self-justification possible. Instead, good is the overabundance of the grace of God within us. And the outstanding feature of that overabundance is that it sidelines Adam’s scheme of retribution, and, in effect, all claims of self-justification. It is an overabundance which is born of the justification of faith alone. Yet this justification, far from being merely external, initiates a transformation of the whole of human life, which no longer is oriented to its own justification, but to the gracious justice of God. There is a Biblical text, frequently ill-translated, where this is all expressed in brief. It is, incidentally, a text which clearly ties in with a number of Anabaptist emphases. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says,

But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you. If you love those who love you, what χάρις is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what χάρις is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what χάρις is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful (ἀχαριστους) and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. (Lc 6:27-36, NRSV)

The word we have left in Greek is usually translated with a term indicating merit. In the NRSV, “What *credit* is that to you?” However, literally, χάρις is the exact opposite of merit or credit; it is *grace*. What *grace* do you show if you only love those who love you, if you only do good to those who do good to you, or if you lend in order to receive?¹⁴ To act without receiving anything in return is action which most specifically does not seek to chalk up merit. It is to act extravagantly, without expecting anything in return. It is the grace of a praxis which does not seek justification, because already graciously justified by God. Remarkably, in Spanish the word “gracia” not only indicates that which is freely given, but also that which is done beautifully. We say someone sings or dances *con gracia* (“with grace,” *i.e.*, beautifully), when they not only go through the motions mechanically in order to get the job done, but it is instead obvious that their art arises from within, effortlessly, as by an extravagance or superabundance of skill. Actually, our text joins together both dimensions of grace: that grace which is the absence of retribution, and that grace which is an extravagance which proceeds from God’s own self, who has made us God’s sons and daughters. And this is because, firstly, graciousness is the very character of God, who gives without measure, expecting no ulterior results. And secondly, graciousness is the character of the children of God, born of the Spirit, thereby different from a world which does not operate according to graciousness but according to retribution, revenge, and systems of reciprocity. Thirdly, graciousness is precisely liberation from the patterns of this world, it is the constitution of a group of people which is different from its environment, which acts according to criteria which are different from the usual. The term “sinners,” in the text we have quoted from Luke, does not primarily designate the moral quality of these persons, but was the standard designation for Pagans, serving to signal the unique character of Messianic Israel, which was different from the surrounding nations. The people of the Messiah are a people where love of enemies, forgiveness, and therefore peace

¹⁴ In Protestant Bibles in Spanish, “¿Qué gracias aureys (tendréis)” was the translation Casiodoro de Reina (and after him, Cipriano de Valera) had from the first edition of 1569 until that of 1960, when the word *gracia* was replaced by the word *mérito*.

as well, become visible. Fourthly, that graciousness present in the people of God does not imply isolation from the world, but activity within the world but according to criteria which are the opposite of the world's: specifically loving enemies, giving without expecting to receive in return, blessing those who hate us.

To be free is not to perpetually keep open the option of being able to decide otherwise. To be free is to be able to live, not according to the patterns of retribution which operate in the world, but according to the graciousness and extravagance of the Spirit of God. Freedom, thus understood, is ever more scarce in what is commonly known as "the free world," where human praxis is ever more subject to measure and calculation. Freedom is not the absence of commitment, but rather that gracious surrender which expects nothing in return. Freedom is not to be self-made, but to lose one's self. Freedom is not to preserve the autonomy of one's own life, but rather to surrender one's life instead of living in enslavement to the fear of death (Hb 2:15). Freedom is not to have time for one's self, but to surrender one's time as a gift, without receiving anything in exchange, for the sake of others. Illustrative of freedom is David dancing naked before the ark of God (2 S 6:14). Illustrative of freedom is Jesus forgiving enemies, returning good for evil, surrendering his very life for his enemies. The essence of freedom is not the autonomy of the will, but rather its graciousness. Freedom and grace are not categories to be held in opposition to each other. Rather, they are two names for one same event, which is the Spirit of God acting within us. Yes, wherever the Spirit of God is, there freedom is to be found, true, full freedom.

Salvation for all

This allows us to understand salvation in a new way. Classic theology understood salvation primarily in terms of "another world." To be saved meant to successfully traverse divine judgment upon death, and thus "go to Heaven." Justification by faith was understood as the passport which assured the favorable judgment of God, and therefore eternal life. However, modern exegesis and theology have discovered other important accents. Let us remember, for instance, that one of the favorite expressions of John, "eternal life," does not necessarily refer to life in another world after death, but especially to a reality which already begins in this life. To receive this eternal life is to receive a life which, precisely because it is eternal, must impinge upon this life, cannot be reserved exclusively for after death. And this has important consequences for understanding the relationship between grace and freedom. Because grace, understood as the personal and liberating surrender of God, is something which is already present in this life, and which finds concrete expression as a life of gratitude. Here the "Anabaptist" objections come fully into their own, or against the notion of a grace which does not find expression in works, or against the notion of an invisible church, whose members only God knows. The freedom which the Spirit brings is something which by its very nature demands expression in a community which is not ruled by the Adam-principle of self-justification, but by the extravagant graciousness of God.

From this perspective, it is important to remember an essential aspect of salvation, normally forgotten first because of Constantinianism, and later because of individualism. It is the essentially communal character of salvation, according to the witness of the Biblical writings. God has always desired to gather a people in which the first-fruits of salvation become visible. God does not just wish to send souls to Heaven, he wishes to restore fallen Creation, which is in the meantime subject to the powers of sin, law, and death. This is not only true of the Hebrew Bible. The New Testament also includes what essentially amounts to the last call of God to Israel to take shape as a new community, where the end-time blessings can become visible, while absorbing within herself all those who are called from among the nations. One of the characteristics of this new community is that within it the longstanding barriers which have separated Jew and Gentile, master and slave, male and female, begin to fall away. This is not just only a legal or political equality, but rather the graciousness which emerges from that very grace upon which the church is founded. The parable of the day-laborers who arrive at the very last hour (Mt 20:1-16), reminds us of the character of the gracious justice of God. Ideally, the justice of this world would distribute to each according to their own personal merit. This is something which of course does not actually happen in an unjust world such as our own, but which, even if did, would not really create equality, but rather differences based on merit. Legal equality is not real equality, but only the ideal goal that what differences do exist be based exclusively upon merit. Only graciousness transcends merit in order to create true equality, and therefore it alone presents us with radical novelty in human history.

We need to realize the true nature of this novelty. The novelty of salvation is not an arbitrary line which God draws between one section of humanity, chosen to be saved, and the rest, who can only rate the old designation as *massa damnata*, that is, the damned masses. However there is no such thing as a mass of those excluded on principle from divine salvation. The salvation of God is nothing other than the gracious expansion of God's Triune life in order to restore the whole of humanity. If the essence of the salvation of God is graciousness, then divine salvation cannot amount to double predestination. Graciousness, by its very nature, is an extravagant good which is not intended for exclusion. Salvation is the divine intention to restore the whole of Creation, not just only a certain indiscernibly or arbitrarily chosen part of it. We need to affirm unequivocally that God's salvation Will is universal, for this is what Scriptures testify. At the same time, to affirm this graciousness is to affirm God's own freedom, and the particular character of God's election. The absolutely personal and unique encounter between God and each human being in particular cannot be substituted for by some theoretical consideration which instead offers an abstract, universal opportunity. In the final analysis, all attempts at abstract universalization ignore the essential historicity, and therefore particularity, not only of the human condition, but of the way God has chosen to relate to humankind. The truth is, if God is truly God, God's relationship with humankind must always have an essentially particular character, because it is the particular which is essentially impossible to manipulate. An abstract universality is nothing

other than a standardized norm whereby we might justify ourselves, and is therefore far removed from the absolute particularity with which God acts upon human history.

It so happens that this particularity is not incompatible with a historically understood universality. This is something that philosophically has been understood ever since Hegel. Within History, any universality must always be a concrete universality. And this is perfectly applicable not only to the election of Christ which Barth spoke of, but also to the election of the church. God does not choose a people in order to exclude others, as would be the case with the classic notion of double predestination. The purpose of a particular election by God is not the exclusion of others, but quite the contrary, it is an absolutely particular election toward the goal of reaching all men and women.¹⁵ So there is indeed a "double predestination," if you will, wherein a few are called in order to call all, while not imposing anything on anyone. The election by God has as its goal the constitution of an absolutely new and special people, yet this is not in order to exclude other peoples, but in order to draw them to God's self. For this reason the church is that people among whom God's will for all of humankind already becomes visible. Here again, a graciousness rightly understood does not exclude freedom in any way. Because the graciousness of God, far from being a legal decree or a reified effluvium, is God's own self living in the midst of God's people, making possible human life which is characterized not by self-justification, but by its very opposite, wherein lies graciousness itself. That graciousness is a challenge to all peoples, exists in contrast to them, all the while also attracting them. To be an alternative always requires that duality wherein there is difference, and yet, at the same time, attractiveness. Consequently, the attractiveness of the people of God lies precisely in that graciousness which overcomes the pattern of retribution. A graciousness which does not give each according to their deserts, but that blesses all without retribution or a resentment. A graciousness wherein humankind may yet find that which it seeks, that which is the very content of its existence in the image of God, free at last of contamination by the Adam-claim to self-justification.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, the classic oppositions set up between grace and freedom were in good measure the result of unexamined presuppositions concerning the very notions of grace and freedom which theology made use of. A more radically Biblical and theological understanding of grace and freedom makes it possible to bring them into harmony. The essence of grace is the very surrender of God for us, in order to share with us God's life in God's freedom. The essence of the freedom which God grants us is not just the capability to choose between two alternatives, or to forever return and make another choice, but participation in God's own graciousness. Graciousness is the very structure of a life liberated from claims of human self-justi-

¹⁵ This is an idea W. Pannenberg develops in his *Systematische Theologie*, vol. 3, Göttingen, 1993, pp. 477-501.

fication. In the end, freedom is not an abstract quality of human nature, but rather a gracious liberation which God brings about and which makes it possible for us to live in accordance with God's own grace. For this reason, freedom is not opposed to grace, but is rather its theological fulfillment. Freedom flows from the grace of God. It is for freedom that Christ has liberated us. This freedom is not something which is granted one part of humanity in order to exclude the rest. The freedom which we have in Christ has been granted in order to reach all of humankind, liberating us from the human logic of self-justification, thus making possible an equality the very essence of which is graciousness. It is the graciousness of those who no longer live to justify themselves, but in the faith of a God who has loved us and given God's self for us.

If we take up the Anabaptist perspective, not as a mark of confessional chauvinism, but as a reference to the basic options which some groups of Christians undertook when in the 16th Century they tried to radically follow Christ, we may say that some of their fundamental intuitions may turn out to be strongly corroborated by the theology of our own day: the idea of a people freely chosen by God, not with a will to exclude anyone, but in order to reach all of humankind; the idea that within that people a new way of living already begins to take shape, distinguished by the absence of retribution, therefore, by graciousness; the idea that that people are not called to close in upon themselves but to reach out to all in order that all might participate in the new life which is in the interest of all; the idea that the gracious offer of God necessarily requires a personal experience of salvation, and the free choice to follow Jesus. These are not, as I see it, denominational particularities, but rather a legacy which today belongs to all Christians. The legacy of an understanding of grace which begins with the experience of the election of God, an election which is not based on merit but on God's love. But yet the experience of an election which makes a new way of living possible, a way of living which, by its very nature, matters to all of humankind. It is the experience of a new Creation. Insofar as it is *new*, it has not yet impinged upon the whole of the old world; but insofar as it is a Creation of God, its ultimate goal is to reach all people, and to make new, radically new, all things.

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