

God in Your Grace Transform the World¹

THE THEME FOR THE ninth Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) at Porto Alegre, Brazil, “God in Your Grace Transform the World,” consisted of a prayer by the church that God in his infinite grace transform his world and ours.

The New Testament witness that God graciously sent Jesus Christ into the world has to be the preeminent transforming act overshadowing every other transformation, past or future. The gospel writer John says: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Paul too tells the church at Rome that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:23–24).

We may say then at the outset that God has already transformed the world, continues to transform the world, and will in the future transform the world through the living Christ, making our first word on the WCC theme of 2006 also our last.

But I should like to give our theme a bit more specificity, and to do this I think it useful to have a look at some foundational teachings in the Old Testament on “grace,” also “favor,” which translate the same Hebrew word, *hēn*. It is the Old Testament that gives us the basic meanings of grace and favor, providing us also with contexts in which these concepts are seen to

1. Lecture given at Thomas Mar Athanasius Memorial Orientation Centre Seminar, Kottayam, Kerala, India, August 12, 2005; published in *Currents in Theology and Mission* 34 (2007) 278–81.

be operative. There we see grace at work in human relationships, gracious activity within Israelite society, and grace both sought and found in a covenant relationship with Yahweh, God of heaven and earth.

Grace, at base, is a term of beauty. It denotes a pleasing aspect or presentation of someone or something and is the quality that this someone or something possesses. The Old Testament speaks of a graceful doe bounding through the field, also a graceful woman, or woman who is gracious (Prov 5:18–19; 11:16). It speaks about gracious words befitting kings (Ps 45:2), or words that please kings along with other people (Prov 22:11; Eccl 10:12).

Even more important than possessed grace is grace finding its way into the eyes of the beholder. Here grace becomes favor. The common Old Testament expression is “to find favor in the eyes of” someone. In our modern world we look for a smile on the face, having now even a stylized face with upturned mouth to display when we are favorably disposed to this or that.

But in the ancient world people looked into the eyes to find favor or a lack of favor. The other Hebrew word most often translated “favor” in the Old Testament is *panim*, meaning “face.” One conveys favor by showing the face; one hides the face to withhold favor. The psalmist knows well that divine anger is conveyed in a “hidden face” (Pss 13:1; 27:9; 30:7).

Grace is a totally positive response in personal relationships. It is so with human beings; it is so with God. Grace cannot coexist with anger or judgment (Prov 28:23), being unlike “love” (Heb *’hb*) in this respect, which can coexist with anger and judgment. Prov 3:12 says: “The LORD reproves him whom he loves.” How the multifarious dispositions of God are harmonized remains a grand mystery, but in humans it appears that love resides at a deeper level of the inner being where conflicting emotions are allowed a coexistence. Grace lies closer to the surface.

Grace is freely given and is thus in the nature of a gift (Gen 33:5–11; Judg 21:22; cf. Rom 3:24; Eph 3:7). Grace can also be freely withdrawn. One is under no obligation to show favor or to continue showing favor. Here it is unlike steadfast love or covenant love (Heb *hesed*), which is a bonding virtue that presupposes rights and obligations. Steadfast love must be kept, demanding as it does positive attitudes and positive actions from both parties to a relationship.

Grace may also and usually does find mutual expression in relationships, but in a different way. It is given freely by one to another, and a relationship in grace is sustained only so long as the giver desires. Grace and favor can be lost (Deut 24:1).

Finally, grace is *active* acceptance, both with human beings and with God. In the Psalms God's grace is paralleled to his "mighty works" (Pss 111:4; 145:4–9). To be gracious means to aid the poor, feed the hungry, deliver those in distress from defeat and death. It also means not oppressing the same and executing justice on their behalf (Exod 22:22–27). If Israel fails to so act, distressed souls in their helplessness will cry to God, and he will hear them, for God says, "I am gracious" (v. 27). Prov 14:31 says that (human) grace to the needy honors God.

Elsa Tamez, a Mexican theologian and biblical scholar, wrote recently on the WCC theme calling for "God's grace and human dignity."² She said, "Grace is not only experienced in a passive way. Grace is a gift that invites us to radiate it from our spirit, mind and body, to manifest it through our attitudes and practices and not just through what we say."

Grace in the Bible is active grace. In the book of Deuteronomy it translates into benevolence to the sojourner, orphan, and widow, also the Levite in town who is out of a job (Deut 14:29; 16:11, 14; 24:17, 19–21; 26:12–13). Israel is to care for these because they are objects of Yahweh's special care (Deut 10:18–19; cf. Jas 1:27).

Yahweh reveals himself first and foremost in the Old Testament as a God of grace. In fact, graciousness is nothing less than a divine attribute (Exod 34:6; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Ps 86:15). But because of this and other grand testimonies regarding God in both Old Testament and New—and I am thinking here of

- a. God's initiative in electing Israel, and later the church as the "new Israel";
- b. God's saving of Israel in the Exodus, and his saving of the world in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ;
- c. God's profound love for the world in general, and sinners in particular; and
- d. God's unconditional covenants to Noah, Abraham, David, and the Church—we are likely to overestimate the scope of God's grace and favor.

A danger of misunderstanding occurs at the following points. First, because God's grace is entirely positive in nature, it cannot coexist with divine anger or divine judgment (Exod 34:6–7; Ps 77:9). Solomon anticipated

2. Elsa Tamez, "God's Grace and Human Dignity," *Ecumenical Review* 57 (2005) 276–77,

this in his prayer of dedication for the temple, telling God in the people's hearing that when the people sin and are judged, they will have to make supplication to God (1 Kgs 8:28–53). Supplications are pleas for divine favor. In the theology of Deuteronomy, sin leads to a loss of divine favor and issues in judgment upon young and old (Deut 28:50; Lam 4:16). Israel understood the loss of nationhood as a loss of divine favor.

Second, because God's grace is freely given and freely taken away, we may come to think that human actions are irrelevant, or at least marginal, in importance. Nothing could be further from the truth. Not only does meritorious behavior figure into God's dispensation of grace; it is also true that because of sin, divine grace must be sought from the human end. Grace is therefore sought and found, which gets to the heart of our WCC prayer. We are seeking divine grace when we pray "God in your grace, transform the world."

Favor can be sought and found by the righteous. While it is certainly true that God loves us and is gracious to us *even when we are undeserving*, it is similarly true that God gives grace to *the righteous* and the humble (Ps 84:11; Prov 3:34). Noah, we are told by the Priestly writer, received favor in the eyes of the Lord because he was *righteous* (Gen 6:8–9). The psalmist, too, knows that he can seek God's favor not only because he is poor and needy, but because he is *godly and trusting* (Ps 86). Prov 3:1–4 says that those who keep God's *commandments* will find favor with God and with other people.

Favor can be *sought and found* by the sinner. David seeks divine favor to blot out his *transgression* (Ps 51:1–2). More often, the psalmist seeks divine favor when he is sick, when he is threatened by enemies, and when he fears death (Ps 116). Here he may be conscious of having sinned, or he may claim to be righteous. The psalms are filled with the supplication, "Be gracious to me" (Pss 6:2; 9:13; 31:9), which appears only there. They are also filled with the plea "Turn and be gracious to me" (Pss 25:16; 86:16; 119:132; cf. 2 Kgs 13:23), where the psalmist imagines that God has turned his face away in anger or in judgment.

In Exod 34:1–9, the great revelation of Yahweh as "a God merciful and gracious" comes immediately after Israel's preeminent sin in the wilderness: the crafting of a golden calf. Moses in response to this divine self-disclosure pleads for God to pardon the people's iniquity and continue the journey with them (Exod 34:9).

After people have sinned, God will again be gracious and merciful if they return to him (Isa 30:19; Jer 31:9; Joel 2:13; 2 Chr 30:9). Sometimes individuals and Israel as a whole have to wait for God's favor (Pss 26; 102:13; 123:3; 140). The prophet Isaiah says:

Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you;
therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you.
For the LORD is a God of justice;
blessed are all those who wait for him. (Isa 30:18)

We need then to know that favor can be sought and found, on the ground of righteousness or on the ground of unrighteousness—the latter if it is accompanied by a confession of sin.

In light of what has been said thus far, what more can we say about our prayer that God in his grace transform the world?

1. We can say, first, that God can indeed transform the world by his grace, no matter what we or anyone else does. Our God is a God of grace, and we can always pray for transforming grace, expecting that it will be given as God chooses, despite all worldly forces working against the divine will.
2. We cannot expect that divine grace will coexist with divine anger or divine judgment. Even with the transforming gift of Christ to the world, there is still the divine wrath to contend with, which Paul says is kindled against all manner of wickedness. In the chilling passage of Rom 1:18–32, Paul says that “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth.” The modern church, particularly in the West, would do well to heed to this sobering word if it hopes to be an agent of God's grace in today's world.

From Paul we learn also that, in spite of salvation by grace alone (Rom 3:24), there is a judgment of God meant to lead people to repentance, also another judgment to be revealed on the final day of the Lord's coming, where every person will be rendered according to his works (Rom 2:1–11). Luther appears to have read right past the important verses 6–8 in Romans chapter 2: “For [God] will repay according to each one's deeds: to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury” (NRSV). So if God does not transform the world by his grace, he will transform it by his wrath, and once again, the modern church will ignore this correlative truth only to its great sorrow.

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3. We can say that divine grace is promised and can be expected to come to individuals and to a church that leads a life of obedience to God's commands, that seeks the higher righteousness Jesus talks about in his Sermon on the Mount. God desires righteous living, and our world will experience great transformation if both individuals and the corporate body of Christ live up to their calling to be God's holy people. The bar of Christian living needs to be raised considerably higher than many have it at the present time.

4. We can say that divine grace will surely abound when individuals and the church repent of their sin. Enormous transformation can come about in our world if those who bear the name of Christ will simply humble themselves and repent rather than seeking to justify, as they so often do, evil and evildoers.

5. Finally, divine grace will surely abound when the church emulates God and carries out active grace to the poor, the needy, and those in distress. Here we become channels of the divine grace, allowing ourselves to be used by a God who cares deeply for all who suffer in our world.