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Pentecostal Grace

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PENTECOSTAL GRACE: FROM A FORENSIC NOTION TO A
PNEUMATOLOGICAL REALITY

Jean-Daniel Plüss

Introduction

Some years ago, Walter Hollenweger, the famous Pentecostal missiologist, remarked in a private conversation that Pentecostals rarely preach on the topic of grace. That statement made me think. Do not the roots of this movement go back to the Reformation and its famous “sola gratia”? We certainly believe that salvation is by grace alone. Why is it, however, that to a large extent we seem to delegate God’s grace to the moment of conversion or to the last judgement? If we appeal to God’s grace it is often when we are in a difficult situation. Overburdened with the work situation or family matters one can hear the minister say, “Oh, by the grace of God it is O.K.” Or we may hear a reading at a funeral service of a wayward pastor’s son who died of a drug overdose: “You have found grace in my sight, I know you by name” (Ex. 33:17).

Another evidence of misunderstanding grace appears when Christians focus on their insufficiency, saying things like, “I can’t live up to the standard God requests. I have disappointed God.” In such instances God’s grace is left out of the equation. Instead, sometimes even under the guise of sanctification, there is a legalism that tries to justify itself. Satisfaction in the face of failure is the only concern; as if God’s love and care is dependent on some action or achievement of ours.

Classical Pentecostals, especially those from the global north, are influenced by a crisis-theology. They emphasize the Cross Event and from there they proclaim the need for a turn-around, a new beginning. Now, do not get me wrong, there is nothing wrong with this fundamental gospel message. But as a consequence, grace is perceived

as something affecting the believer mainly because of his or her past; or because of his or her sin.

In the same vein, we can look at the *Global Dictionary of Theology*¹, which has been co-edited by Pentecostals. If you look for the term “grace” you find the remark: “See Salvation.” Naturally, the heritage from the Reformation has brought an emphasis on justification by faith and therefore a focus on God’s grace through the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. But the question remains, do we understand God’s grace as believers mainly in relation to our sinful past, or is there a present and forward-looking reality of grace? What does the Bible tell us and what can Pentecostals contribute to an understanding of grace that is informed by an ongoing experience of God’s indwelling Spirit?

In order to make my argument I invite you to look back, first at the history of theological development and secondly at biblical foundations of God’s grace. Then, I would like to sketch a few suggestions towards a Pentecostal pneumatology of grace.

The Historical Context of the Reformer’s Emphasis on Grace

We might begin with St. Augustine, the North-African born theologian and bishop who lived in the late 4th and early 5th century AD. Before he became a Christian, Augustine seriously sought wisdom and fulfilment in life by studying diverse philosophical issues and adhering to various religious practices. He also enjoyed the physical aspects of life, including various relationships with women. Since he had not yet been baptized, he believed he could permit himself all kinds of adventures that he knew were below the Christian standard. According to the belief of the time, the sacrament of baptism would cancel all former sins.

In his early 30s when he finally turned to Christ, he could not explain God’s great mercy toward him through all the years of his immoral and selfish behaviour. Augustine attributed it to God’s infinite love, wisdom and foreknowledge.² God could be gracious because he knew that Augustine would eventually turn to Jesus Christ. God’s grace was therefore closely linked to God’s love which reached a spiritually bankrupt sinner, regardless of his sin and selfishness. It simply was to be. As a human being there was nothing that he could

¹ William A. Dryness and Veli Matti Kärkkäinen eds. *Global Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2008).

² This is repeatedly stated in St. Augustine’s *Confessions*.

have presented as an argument or achievement on behalf of himself. It was all due to God's grace.

This biographical element helps us to understand why Augustine's anthropology is so different from his contemporary Pelagius, an ascetic monk and fine theologian as well as skilled orator from the British Isles. He believed that every human being had a God-given ability to choose to do right and live a God-pleasing life.³ He argued that humans were created in the image of God and could therefore do more than behave like dimwits. However, Pelagius was soon to be condemned as a heretic, because his teachings were understood to favour the ability of human beings and, consequently, diminish God's plan of salvation in Jesus Christ and the necessary atonement of the Son of Man on the cross.

A thousand years later, the same challenge to grace resurfaced. The church in the Holy Roman Empire was focussing heavily on the actions and duties of human beings to please God. The mortification of the body, a strict exercise of spiritual practices and perilous pilgrimages to holy places encouraged the idea that one could contribute to one's salvation. Extravagant building plans, such as the construction of St. Peter's basilica in Rome, with the financial outlay such projects entailed, encouraged yet another possible avenue to diminish eternal torment for sin. Prior to the Reformation, the donation of money for holy causes through the sale of indulgencies became highly popular in Europe.

At the same time, the rise of the Renaissance period led to a rediscovery of human achievements in literature, the sciences and the arts. Erasmus of Rotterdam exalted God's creation of human beings, saying that he created them with a free will. A Christian humanism arose that emphasized the positive aspects of creation.

It is in this context that we have to interpret the Reformation theology of grace. Salvation could not be realized through the offices of any church, nor through the abilities of human beings. It could only be accomplished through God's grace demonstrated through the atoning sacrifice of Christ. There simply was, as Paul said, no one that did good - not even one (Rom. 3:12). It does not surprise us then that the Reformers emphasized Augustine's point of view. Eternal life is a gift of God's grace for the world to be reconciled with God through Christ (2 Cor. 5:19).

³ From what we know about the life of Pelagius, we can ascertain that his theology was also developed by his personal experiences, especially his ascetic upbringing and in reaction to the decadence he witnessed when he came to Rome.

As a result of this strong emphasis on God's action, reformation theologians argued that human beings had no free will at all. Our communion with God depends on God's grace alone. For Martin Luther this was the case because otherwise the work of Jesus Christ on the cross would have been in vain. The Swiss reformer Huldrych Zwingli argued that if man had the ability to decide, God would no longer be sovereign. And John Calvin, the former lawyer, reasoned in Geneva that if God was really God, he had to be omniscient and therefore by necessity, predestined those who would belong to the ones saved by his grace and by implication knew who did not.

Consequently, the emphases on God's sovereign work of grace and the inability of every human to do anything about his salvation lead to a very forensic notion of grace.⁴ This highly rationalistic explanation stated that man's sin required punishment and that Jesus took it upon himself to satisfy God's wrath. In this way every human being was at least legally reconciled with God. We are acquainted with this style of reasoning that has been emphasized in various ways over the years, more recently by the Princeton School at the beginning of the 20th century. As a result God's grace was mainly delegated to the work of salvation. Therefore, many churches of the Reformation taught grace at the expense of the message of salvation, and the free churches taught the message of salvation at the expense of grace.

However, the humanist influence on the Reformation could not be suppressed. It was not long before moderate views emerged that tried to harmonize the human predicament with God's sovereignty. Philipp Melancthon, the collaborator of Martin Luther, suggested that there was something like a synergy between God's Word, the work of the Holy Spirit and the human will. And the Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius opposed the strict Calvinist teaching on predestination by arguing that God has given prevenient grace by the power of the Holy Spirit so that everyone can decide for or against receiving salvation. A generation later John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, made the Arminian point of view popular. Especially during the great revivals of the 19th century there has been an "Arminianisation" of the Protestant churches in North America.

Today our evangelistic and missionary efforts would be unthinkable without the firm belief that every human being is created with a free will and can consequently decide for or against the offer of God in Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, the question remains, is our

⁴ Anselm of Canterbury (satisfaction and atonement), Peter Abelard (emphasis on Aristotelian logic) and scholasticism cemented this understanding.

understanding of God's grace mainly limited to the offer of salvation or is there more, much more? To be fair, Calvin would have answered, "Of course there is much more!" for he understood God's grace to be a double grace. The one grace was evident in the justification of the sinner as the work of the Son and the other grace was seen in the sanctification of the believer by the work of the Spirit.

Christ was given to us by God's generosity, to be grasped and possessed by us in faith. By partaking of him, we principally receive a double grace: namely, that being reconciled to God through Christ's blamelessness, we may have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father; and secondly, that sanctified by Christ's spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life"⁵

This teaching on a double grace resonates as "double cure" in the 18th century hymn *Rock of Ages* where we sing:

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
let me hide myself in thee;
let the water and the blood,
from thy wounded side which flowed,
be of sin the double cure;
save from wrath and make me pure.⁶

At this point then we have established that there is saving grace and that there is sanctifying grace. In either case is it something that God does. It is a gift from above. I am eternally grateful for the two, but allow me to ask, "Is grace only something that is done? Or is grace also a reality that lives inside, something that is?" With that in mind, let us look at the Bible.

A Plea for a Biblical Understanding of Grace

Beginning with the Old Testament, we can look at the creation account and hear God say, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness" (Gen. 1:26). Assuming that God is love in a triune relationship, we can then interpret this verse as an invitation to humankind to have fellowship with God. Just as God is not love by

⁵ John Calvin, John T. McNeil, ed., *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960) III.xi.1, 725.

⁶ <http://www.hymnsite.com/lyrics/umh361.sht>, accessed December 29, 2011.

himself, but love in a relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit, so is man created not to live by himself, but to live in a relationship with others and with God.

This divine intention present in the essence of creation can be seen in that God calls a people to himself in loving relationship. The covenants, the exodus, the testimony of the prophets are all a testimony to God's desire to dwell among his people because he is "a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness" (Ex. 34:6). The Old Testament presents us with a notion of grace that is expressed in God's love and faithfulness. God desires to be with his people. We can say that the Old Testament translates God's grace as being lovingly present.

If we look at the New Testament, the former teaching of God's loving presence is carried over. Jesus is to be called, Immanuel, which means God is with us (Mt.1:23). We learn that God wishes to abide in us. In John 15:9 we read, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love." The context emphasizes it more than once; to remain in God is to abide in his presence and love. As disciples of God, we have been called to fellowship with him.

From the divine perspective, God also intends to abide in us as we learn from Romans 5:5 "And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us."

What we see here is a notion of grace that is not only forensic, nor solely a means for sanctification, but an expression of love manifested in the presence of God in the lives of his people. Along the same vein we can appreciate the various texts that speak about *koinonia*, the fellowship of God. In 1 Cor. 1:4-9 we are told that God's grace has been given to us in Jesus Christ. In him we have been enriched and do not lack any spiritual gift. God's faithfulness is demonstrated in the fellowship we have in Christ.

We can give yet another illustration of this theology of grace. It flows from the triune nature of God, which is relational and loving. In the benediction we hear, "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." (2. Cor. 13:14). God's intention which has been actualized in Christ is being communicated by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God's gift to us to enable us to know and experience the indwelling presence of God and the power of his kingdom.⁷ Whereas the

⁷ This is basically the formulation of grace by the Roman Catholic Church, who through the ages maintained the biblical understanding of divine grace as the loving presence of

Reformers have mainly focused on the work of Jesus Christ in explaining the theology of grace, we see that the biblical witness gives an important role to the Holy Spirit in communicating the gift of God to us. I invite you therefore to reflect on a Pentecostal theology of grace that focuses on God's living presence in our lives, actualized through the presence of the Holy Spirit in us.

A Pneumatology of Grace

Let us begin then with a focus on the nature and work of the Holy Spirit in us before we move on to provide more general examples of a Pentecostal theology of grace.

The Comforter

In Johannine theology we see a strong connection to the Old Testament teaching on the presence of God. In the opening paragraph of the Gospel according to John we read that God has manifested his presence through the abundance of his grace in Jesus (John 1:16-18).

As the ministry of Jesus draws to a climax, there is a promise that this fullness is not to end, for God does not want to leave us as orphans. On the contrary, the disciples are promised the presence of the Comforter, who has the same spirit of truth⁸ for those who abide in God's love (John 14:15-21). The evangelist must have clearly understood that the Holy Spirit is to be the main actor in conveying God's presence to and within the Church.

The Inner Witness

A similar example is found in Pauline theology. Not only is there an inner witness of the Holy Spirit in our hearts that we are children of

God. "Grace is a participation in the life of God. It introduces us into the intimacy of Trinitarian life: by Baptism the Christian participates in the grace of Christ, the Head of his Body. As an "adopted son" he can henceforth call God "Father," in union with the only Son. He receives the life of the Spirit who breathes charity into him and who forms the Church." Roman Catholic Catechism paragraph 1997; <http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/p3slc3a2.htm#1997>, accessed December 28, 2011.

⁸ The notion of truth in a Johannine context should not be mistaken to be an Aristotelian category that looks at truth in terms of definitions and logical arguments, but rather in the Semitic sense of trustworthiness, reliability and faithfulness, thus closely connected with the understanding of grace in the Old Testament.

God, the context shows us that through God's Spirit we are made participants in the nature of God. We are heirs, sharing in Christ's suffering and his glory, for the Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is also raising us to eternal communion with God (Rom. 8:11-17).

The Divine Power Within Us

The favourite Pentecostal theologian is of course Luke. He made sure that we would remember that God's gift to his people does not simply reside in propositional truths that should be believed. But God's gift to us is his presence, manifested in the power of the Spirit that lives within us (Acts 1:8). Whereas some Protestants argued that it is enough to live by the promises of the Word of God, others have argued that the Bible teaches us that we do not need to go through life as if we had to be religious agnostics.⁹ There are indeed visible signs of God's grace in our lives. We read in Acts 14:3, "So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders." This is probably one of the core teachings that Pentecostals can share with discouraged Christians of other churches, namely that God loves us so much that he enjoys communicating with us, not only through his Word, not only through the celebration of sacraments, but in our worship and through manifestations of his presence and power. Therefore, we can testify to the fact that God is doing great things; even today.

Praying in the Spirit

Allow me to give you one more pneumatological example of God's graceful presence in the believer's life. In Romans 8 we are encouraged to be hopeful in view of the future glory and allow the Holy Spirit to pray within us, especially for that which we are not able to express in our own words. It does not matter whether you are a charismatic person believing that God has given you an unknown prayer language by which you communicate with God, or if you are a more contemplative kind of Christian that meditates in silence before God; the fundamental truth is the same. God, through the Holy Spirit, is sharing his presence and good will with you. This is grace in the here and now.

⁹ Peter Hocken, *Revival and Renewal*, (in JEPT A Vol. XVIII), 1998, 49-63.

These four pneumatological examples (comforter, inner witness, power and presence in prayer) should encourage us to work towards a Pentecostal theology of grace).

Towards a Pentecostal Understanding of Grace

Many critics of Christianity in general and of Pentecostalism in particular see the charismatic element as promoting a very individualistic life style. These critics point to obvious examples: the individual nature of salvation, the personal decision to be baptized, the subjective experience of Spirit Baptism, personal testimony and the often private nature of prophetic utterances. How are we as Pentecostals to answer this challenge? Well, we certainly can uphold our conviction that the God spoken of in the Bible is often presented as a very personal and personable God. We do not need to be ashamed of desiring to deepen our personal relationship with God. On the other hand, our understanding of grace as a relational reality in which the Holy Spirit plays an essential role could lead us to a new appreciation of Pentecost as an event that has a wider focus than the individual.

Relevant Applications from a Pentecostal Perspective

There are a number of ways that we can apply what we have learned. We can begin in the book of Acts.

Acts 2 in the Light of Grace and Encounter

We tend to read the first two chapters in the Book of Acts in terms of the empowerment that Jesus promised to his disciples. Indeed, empowerment is a prominent feature in Lukan pneumatology. We can also read in Acts how God shares his nature with his people through the present work of the Holy Spirit. The Trinitarian context is clearly evident in the first nine verses of the book and resonates the theme of God abiding with his people.

The second chapter has a strong communitarian emphasis. They all came together in one place, the sound of the blowing wind filled the whole house, the tongues of fire rested on each of them, and all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit. This inclusiveness, however, is not limited to the recipients of God's Spirit. It extends to the attracted

crowds. They all heard them speak in their own native languages, they all received the invitation to repent and turn to God. Then we read that the apostles and new converts were fellowshiping with one another, shared in worship and had everything in common. They opened their homes for the breaking of bread and ate together with gladness. What the early Christians did was favourably reported by all people.

In the light of a theology of grace we see that God's presence through the power of the Holy Spirit is the promise of the Father in Jesus Christ that transforms people, enabling them to encounter each other in love. As the early church grows, it displays its ministry of hospitality¹⁰, just as Jesus did on so many occasions during his earthly ministry. It is a hospitality that extends to the stranger, to the Samaritans as well as to the barbarians, to men and women, to masters and slaves, to the able-bodied as well as to those with disabilities. This hospitality does not treat others as a target audience, but shares in their needs and joys, just as God is not only gracious so that we might find eternal life, but loves us and enjoys being in communion with us. The Kingdom of God that has begun to grow among us is a peaceable kingdom where relationships are re-ordered and we experience God's loving embrace.¹¹ Looking back at the initial statement of this section we can say that an individualistic attitude to faith does not echo the Trinitarian nature of God, and God's good will towards all. It does not echo the message of the early church in the book of Acts. And it does not echo the witness of early events in the Pentecostal revival. The famous statement by Frank Bartemann, that the color line was washed away by the blood (of Jesus)¹² is not just a single statement that has been given mythic status. The breaking of social, racial and gender barriers has been well documented at the Azusa Street revival and in other places. Take for example the report of the Sunderland Conference in England in 1909. There we read:

¹⁰ Amos Yong, *Hospitality and The Other. Pentecost, Christian Practices and The Neighbor* (New York, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), pp. 100-108.

¹¹ *Experience In Christian Faith And Life: Worship, Discipleship, Discernment, Community, and Justice*. The Report of the International Dialogue between Representatives of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and Some Classical Pentecostal Churches and Leaders 2001-2011, paragraph 148. <http://www.pctii.org/cyberj/index.html> accessed January, 21, 2012.

¹² Frank Bartleman, *Azusa Street The Roots of Modern-day Pentecost* (Gainesville, Fla.: Bridge-Logos Publishers, 1980), 61, 54, 55. See also his: *Azusa Street*. S. Plainfield, N.J.: Bridge Publishing, 1980; originally published in 1925 as *How Pentecost Came to Los Angeles*.

The Peace of Pentecost. Wondrous harmony! “They were all of one accord.” The Holy Spirit is the great Unifier. He is calling out and preparing the “body” of Christ, inspiring it with a common fellowship with the Father and with the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is manifest that these people are baptized into one body; they have drunk of one Spirit, and have one mind – the mind of Christ.

No racial antipathies here! Without there may be war-scares, but here perfect brotherhood amongst all the different tongues and kindred. Those beloved German brethren! Our hearts went out in extra yearnings of love toward them. No denominationalism! Anglicans, Lutherans, and every kind of Nonconformists, all assented in a common “Yea and Amen” to the Bible faith which has been once for all delivered unto the saints. Here is the witness to the world, that Pentecost is of God. Its perfect peace and concord stamp it with the hall-mark of heaven. “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another”. Nothing has ever so united the children of God scattered abroad, as this blessed experience.¹³

In a more recent example, a Pentecostal pastor from the Ukraine came to visit a Pentecostal church in Zurich that is known for its strong cell group ministry. He was amazed when he visited a small group meeting in a private home. There he witnessed a university professor, an immigrant accused of drug smuggling, a CFO of a financial institution, a nurse, an apprentice and others worshipping God together, studying Scripture, embracing each other and enjoying fellowship. The Ukrainian pastor was deeply touched when he realized that status, nationality and gender were insignificant in that group. This was indeed the spirit of Pentecost, when Christ’s grace reached out to everyone.

The Charisms as Gifts of Grace

Furthermore, we can pursue the communal dimension of grace when we look at the gifts the Holy Spirit gives to the Body of Christ. The text in 1 Cor. 12 makes it clear that each manifestation is given for the common good (verse 7), that the Spirit of God is at work in the Body as a unit, for we have all been baptized by one Spirit into one body (verse 13).

Taking our definition of grace as a starting point, namely that God desires to be present in his love among his creation, we then see that

¹³ *Confidence*, June 1909, 128. Similar statements could probably be found among early Asian Pentecostals and in other parts of the world. The statement about the “beloved German brethren” at a conference held in England reflects the ever growing economic tensions and political rivalry between Great Britain and Germany at the time.

God is indeed present in the charismatic gifting of the church, not just in a hidden way but to the obvious benefit of the church. We also recognize that the way of love stands above any manifestation, because God is the way of love in Jesus Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit. The gifts are God-given graces to the church intended to transform the church into God's image.

In the first issue of the English magazine *Confidence* Smith Wigglesworth the well-known English evangelist describes the situation as follows, "I hold much fellowship with those that speak and sing with new Tongues. All have one story to tell, viz., that the blessing and joy is beyond describing. Why stop at the barren field of justification, when there are waters of God's love to swim in? Why live in the experience of Romans 7 when there is Romans 8 full of life in the Spirit without condemnation?"¹⁴

A Pentecostal doctrine of grace would emphasize the divine reality in the church and in the world and focus less on individual gifts and benefits. And if we look at the revelatory dimension in the charism of prophecy, Veli Matti Kärkkäinen is correct in emphasizing that revelation is fundamentally God's self-communication through his Spirit and not the disclosure of divinely privileged information about God.¹⁵ God's self-revelation would call the church to be an extension of the triune nature of God, a prophetic voice yes, but more fundamentally a serving, caring and salvific community, the incarnation of Christ in our midst. This is the challenge that we face in the 21st century, to turn away from our Western individualism and rekindle the light of grace that shines upon the community as a whole. Maybe that is where Asian Pentecostals can encourage Western Pentecostals to mend their ways and be more attentive to the community. 1 Peter 4:10 brings it to a point: "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms."

Becoming Ambassadors of Reconciliation

In 2 Corinthians 5 we read that Christians long for the heavenly dwelling which brings them into union with God, the believer has received God's Spirit as a deposit or guarantee to this divine promise.

¹⁴ *Confidence*, April 1908, 7.

¹⁵ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 77.

When this promise will become reality, God's grace towards us will no longer be necessary, because we will fully share in the nature of God (2 Peter 1:4). In the meantime it is our goal to please God and serve humankind.

As people touched by God's grace we no longer regard people from a worldly point of view, but through the lens of Jesus Christ who brought us the ministry of reconciliation. Touched by God's grace we reach out to others.¹⁶ As Christ's ambassadors we share God's grace as witnesses of his loving presence, pleading "Be reconciled with God!" Our mission then goes beyond the conversion of the sinner. Our mission is to become God's relationship to others. Through the work of the Holy Spirit we can become Immanuel so that others may gratefully exclaim, "God is indeed with us."

Conclusion

Much more could be said about a Pentecostal theology of grace. One could for instance relate the gifts of the Spirit more strongly with the fruit of the Spirit and the kingdom teaching (Gal 5:16-26). One thing is for sure, God's grace as revealed at Calvary and on Pentecost is not so much appropriated as an intellectual notion, but rather it is an attitude of the heart. And in that sense we can recall St. Augustine's exclamation at the beginning of his *Confessions*: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You."

¹⁶ Chapter 5 does not mention the word grace as such, but the text is embedded by a teaching on grace. 2 Cor. 4:15 All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God. 2 Cor. 6:1 As God's fellow-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain.