

“The Grace of God has Appeared.” Which Grace?

Colleagues,

Back in the days of the old lectionary—before the three-year cycle came to be—we had the same readings year after year for every Sunday and festival day. And so it came to pass in THOSE days that Titus 2:11-14 was always the epistle for “Christmas Day, The Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord.” That text was assigned to us first year neophytes at Concordia Seminary—now almost 50 years ago—for our first attempt at writing a sermon. [No, I don’t still have that sermon on file, “in the barrel” as preachers like to say. For which we can all be thankful.]

Titus 2:11 ff. fits the feast. No doubt about it. But it doesn’t elicit images of manger, madonna and magi. It’s Christmas theology, not the Christmas story. Or is that really an either/or? Listen for yourself.

“For the grace of God has appeared bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.” [NRSV]

That Titus text came to mind in an exchange I’ve had recently with one of you. It focused on the opening term of the Titus text: the Grace of God. My conversation partner was a Seminex grad, one of our brightest and best. I’d commented on an essay of his that he’d given me to read. I’d wondered out loud to him

why he eschewed Lutheran lingo in places where I would've expected it. In response he urged me to notice that the theology of the entire piece was grace-full. "The title and several passages stress that it's the grace of God in Jesus Christ that most powerfully motivates people to work for justice. So Lutheran teaching shapes the work, even though the section on the Bible didn't start with the law/gospel formula." What could be more Lutheran than that?

My first response was "HmMMM." But then these thoughts followed and I passed them on to him.

One item that we sought to pass on to students at Seminex was a specific angle on the Lutheran Confessions. We claimed: it was NOT "grace alone" that was at the center of the Reformation hubbub in the 16th century. Our evidence for this came from the "other side" itself at that time. In their first response to the Augsburg Confessions' Article IV (justification by faith) the pontifical theologians say:

"First of all, no one of all Catholics has ever thought that we might attain to blessedness by our merits without grace. For grace must precede, accompany, and follow, even as our mother Church has taught us to pray, 'We beseech thee, O Lord, that in all our actions the gift of Thy grace may go before and its assistance follow after us.'"

So the brouhaha was not about grace, not even about "grace alone."

The Roman critics of Augsburg go on to say that it's the "faith alone" (sola fide) element which is mistaken, probably even heretical. No surprise then, that when author Melanchthon has to defend his "faith alone" theology in AC IV he prefaces his response in Apology IV with a couple of "how to read the Bible"

paragraphs, his Biblical hermeneutic of law/promise.

When you look at the grace of God through those law/promise lenses, you get something like this. There is Grace and then there is Grace. Even when talking about God's grace, we need to heed the axiom of the second great "Martin" of 16th century Reformation theology, Martin Chemnitz. [Of him it was said: if the second Martin had not come along, the theology of the first Martin would have disappeared in the 16th century, i.e., would have disappeared among the Lutherans!] Chemnitz's axiom is: "Law and promise must be distinguished at every point in Christian doctrine."

So God's Law has its grace and God's Gospel has its grace—and the twain do meet, but ought not to be mixed—"must be distinguished"—lest both get lost. Law's gift of grace is the stuff Luther describes in his explanation of the First Article of the creed in the Small Catechism. "I believe that God has created me networked with all creatures and has GIVEN me...." All these creator's gifts are freebees, yes, but gifts that obligate. Remember the ending of Luther's explanation here: "for all of which I am obligated to thank and to praise, to serve and obey him. This is most certainly true." These grace-gifts obligate. Au contraire the grace-giving that begins as the creed's Second Article unfolds. There comes the grace-gift that not only does NOT obligate us, but that rescues us from the unfulfilled obligations, the debts we've incurred from mucking up in the earlier grace-gift business with God.

Throughout world religions, I'd say, any deity worth her salt is "grace-y." Well, lots of them at very least. No deity can get away for long without being in some sense benign [= gracious] to the devotees—for whatever variety of reasons.

So it seems to me that grace is not THE Reformation aha! that

got our tradition going. Not only that, “Grace” is not even the unique bailiwick of Christianity. Some kind of grace, even grace alone, is in, with, and under the fabric of world religions as well as many of the more recent home-made ones now mushrooming around us.

Which brings us back to Titus 2. What’s unique about the “grace of God which appeared in Jesus Christ,” is not that it was GRACE appearing in the mangled Messiah, but the KIND of grace, a “NEW wine” kind, as this Messiah later claimed. Such NEW grace, brand new—as the Greek word used in the NT signals—then called for NEW Wineskins both to receive it (call it “faith”) and to live it (call it the NEW commandment). Isn’t Titus 2 telling us that?

“For the grace of God has appeared bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.”

The words “appeared” and “manifestation” are the word “epiphany” in the original. Epiphanies are surprises, really different from what’s routine. So the “grace of God appearing in Jesus Christ” is not run-of-the-mill grace. And what’s so different about this grace is that the Jesus who’s at the center of it “gave himself for us that he might redeem us.” Where in the annals of “generic” grace was there ever any grace like that?

In fact, I’d propose a different rendering of the opening line, possible I think from the Greek text since the “salvation” term is not a noun, but an adjective. That would go like this: “For a saving grace of God has appeared for all,” concrete in the one

“who gave himself for us to redeem us.” No grace that obligates here. That’s a grace that liberates. It liberates us from the “you’ve gotta” of the law’s grace-gifts into the “you get to” of a new paedagogy (Greek root rendered “training” in the text is “paideia”).

We get to “renounce the God-empty pressure (passion) that permeates our world.” We get to live lives with newness (brand new!) in three dimensions signalled by those three terms “self-control, upright & godly.” [A sermon by Luther on this text interprets these three words to be humankind’s three primal relationships—to self, to others, to God.] They signal the new 3-D wineskins in which we “get to” live when we’re imbibing the new grace at Christmas. And, of course, there’s a new “get to” for the future too. We get to “wait with blessed hope” for what’s yet to come, the final epiphany of this “great God and Saviour.” It could happen in A.D.2000.

Even if we don’t get THAT epiphany next year, we already have its predecessor in what epiphanied at Christmas. May the epiphany of THAT grace render you Y2K compliant for the entire Year of Our Lord 2000.

Pax et Gaudium! Ed