

## THE GRACE OF GOD COMES IN A PIÑATA

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Since I was a kid, I learned to say “gracias” for everything given to me. To show gratitude for receiving a gift. As a theologian I got a deep sense of what *grace* means.

Searching in Early Christianity, and especially on Augustine who came from the periphery of the Roman Empire, in the midst of the fifth century, I found that he breaks the pattern of Christian theological framework of the time. Pelagius (350 -425 C.E.) a British ascetic who lived and taught at Rome, a well respected moral reformer and biblical commentator was the leading theological voice at the time. As Professor McGuckin underlined talking about Pelagius teaching’s: “a common aspect of his teaching is that God has given the church moral commandments in the Scriptures and in natural conscience, and it is the duty of the disciple to put these into action by faithful obedience.”<sup>1</sup> As Augustine aged, he grew increasingly suspicious of cultural discourses that render Christianity into a simplistic cult of moral “self-improvement.” His starting point of his thought was his own experience of faith “when the grace of God has breathed the divine love into us and has made us subject to His will, to us it is said: Ye are called for freedom, and the grace of God has made me free from the law of sin and of death.”<sup>2</sup> He marked a radical new departure of style of theological writing not coming from a philosophical reflection of a dogma but through his own experience of God’s love in his conversion.

So we have a tension of two points of departure: monergism versus synergism; free will versus grace of God. For Augustine these tension is solve giving these two examples: “that we can see with our eyes does not depends on us, but what we choose to see good or bad that is on us” “that we are able to speak comes from God, but what we say right or wrong depends on us.”<sup>3</sup>

At the end Augustine position was valid by the magisterium and Pelagius condemn and persecute his followers.

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<sup>1</sup> McGuckin, J.A. *Patristic Theology* London: Westminster John Knox Press (2004:256)

<sup>2</sup> Lee Dixon, S. *Augustine – The Scattered and Gathered Self* (1999:151)

<sup>3</sup> Agustín, H. *Obras de San Agustín* (1949: Tomo VI, cap.XVI, pag. 341)

Augustine, will built his theology of Grace based in the psalms and the letters of Paul, reason why he is going to be called the “doctor of grace.” In his argument, he not only affirms the ontological priority of God, but also that is given as a gift and as a gesture of love.

In the England of XVIII, John Wesley through his experience of faith was also surprised by the *grace* of God.

He started his sermons saying:

“All the blessings which God hath bestowed upon man are of his mere grace, bounty, or favour; his free, undeserved favour, favour altogether underserved; man having no claim to the least of his mercies. It was free grace that “formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into him a living soul,” and stamped on that soul the image of God and, “put all things under his feet.” The same free grace continues to us, at this day, life, and breath, and all things.”<sup>4</sup>

For this reason many scholars agree to underlined that Wesley’s theology is rooted in a deep and profound understanding of God’s grace. In order to enrich the doctrine of “Justification by faith” of the protestant reformers, for Wesley “Grace is the source, faith the condition of salvation.”<sup>5</sup> For him, grace is not only the starting point of his theology but also it is central in his soteriology.

“the grace of God is sometimes to be understood that free love, that unmerited mercy, by which I a sinner, through the merits of Christ, am now reconciled to God.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *The Works of John Wesley* (1856: Vol. 5, Sermon I:4 )

<sup>5</sup> *Idem.* p. 6

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* (1856: Vol. 5, Sermon XII:132)

In his well known sermon "Free Grace," John Wesley said that the "grace or love of God, whence cometh our salvation is free in all, and free for all."

As we can see, for Augustine as well as for Wesley Grace is going to be related to love, but in the case of Wesley this love has a wider comprehension questioning the understanding of grace/love only as a narrow gift given only to the elected (predestination).

For it, he takes a time in his essay entitled "*Predestination calmly considered*," (1752) to deconstruct all the arguments of the doctrine of predestination, the theological argument that reduce grace to some privileged elected by unconditional predestination by divine decree to access for salvation. In this essay, Wesley calmly used biblical texts (Old and New Testament) with rhetorical questions, a clear prose style and balance with logic and common sense he will argue with his detractors and precise his argument that the idea of absolute unconditional predestination by divine decree was inconsistent with God's justice, as well as his love and goodness.

His essay starts with a quote of Milton (1608-1674) and English poet and polemicist of his epic poem *Paradise Lost* in which Milton declares that his aim in the poem is "to justify the ways of God to men," and for it he develop the concept of the *providence* of God.

Then with a clear prose style, Wesley describe his own understanding of the providence of God and the relation with the unconditional free grace:

"I am inclined to believe that many of those who enjoy the faith which worketh by love may remember some time when the power of the Highest wrought upon them in an eminent manner, when the voice of the Lord laid the mountains low, brake all the rocks in pieces (1 Kings 19:11) and mightily shed abroad his love in their hearts by the Holy Ghost given unto them (cf. Rom. 5:5)..."

"How easily, then, may a believer infer from what he hath experienced in his own soul that the true grace of God *always works irresistibly* in every believer.."

After presenting his argument he analyzed confessions of faith and theological arguments that are in accordance with predestination and used Old and New Testament Scriptures to mention deconstruct this doctrine.

One idea he works a lot in this essay is the idea of “election” First, he argues against Calvin that “election” has to be understood as a divine appointment to a particular task, not to a eternal happiness. In that case we cannot talk of unconditional “election” without reprobation, doing so is “quite silly and childish.” He argues:

“to be consistent with yourself you must openly assert, that ‘without reprobation this election cannot stand.’ You know it cannot. You know, if God hath fixed a decree that these men only shall be saved, in such decree it is manifestly implied, that all other men shall be damned.”<sup>7</sup>

For this reason, he asserts that “he never agree with reprobation because is this is irreconcilable to the whole scope and tenor both of the Old and New Testament.”

Second he reviews the Scripture to reject this precarious assertion utterly unsupported by Holy Scripture:

“Now, show me the scriptures wherein God declares in equally express terms, 1.Christ did not die “for all,” but for some only. 2.Christ is not “the for the sins of the whole world, and 3. He did not die “for all,” at least, not with that intent, “that they should lived unto him who died for them.” Show me, I say, the scriptures that affirm these three things in equally express terms. You know there are none...”<sup>8</sup>

For this reason, he asserts:

“The sovereignty of God is then never to be brought to supersede his justice. And this is the present objection against unconditional

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<sup>7</sup> Wesley, J. *The Works of John Wesley* (1856: Vol. X: 201)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 217

reprobation (the plain consequence of unconditional election)..”<sup>9</sup>

And ends saying:

“This is my grant objection to the doctrine of reprobation or (which is the same) unconditional election. That it is an error, I know, because if this were true, the whole Scripture must be false. But it is not only for this (because it is an error) that I so earnestly oppose it, but because it is an error of so pernicious consequence to the souls of men; because it directly and naturally tends to hinder the inward work of God in every stage of it.”<sup>10</sup>

Wesley here shows not only his theological argument with a strong biblical background, but also a strong sensitivity for common people:

“The observing these melancholy examples day by day, this dreadful havoc which the devil makes of souls (especially of those who had begun to run well) by means of this antisciptural doctrine, constrains me to oppose it from the same principle whereon I labour to save souls from destruction...”<sup>11</sup>

For this reason there is no exaggeration to say that Wesley’s theology had a wider constructive way that comes to observe with sensitivity the sphere of practical religion.

I can imagine the England of XVIII century, in a social scenario of the Industrial revolution, where poor people were expelled from the rural areas to the big cities as work force with low wages and working overtime hours. An official church of lords and ladies where they didn’t have a place; or Presbyterian churches who talk about the “elected” in where also they did not have a place, and in the midst of these loneliness and misery, listen to John Wesley preach the good news of a “Free Grace” that no matter anything they could have free access to God’s love and justice. Can you

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 213

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 247

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 248

imagine the faces of joy and the empowerment of their will and manners to perceive of God's grace and love?

With all this thoughts about *grace* I come to the present times, in the last five years I worked as a minister in Brooklyn, New York City and also work close with the Sanctuary movement supporting Latino immigrants, who were basically Mexicans from the rural areas of Guerrero, Puebla and Oaxaca.

Even though they were very present in the neighborhood where I have my parish, they hardly come to church, most of the time because they work hard even on weekends.

But the strong presence of the immigrant Mexican community at church was on Advent season. They called *Posadas*. Posadas are an important Mexican Christmas tradition. These community celebrations take place on each of the nine nights leading up to Christmas from December 16 to 24<sup>th</sup>.

The word *posada* means "inn" or "shelter" in Spanish and illustrates the Bible story of Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem and their search for a place to stay. Celebration that turns very meaningful for a community that is looking for a safe shelter and safe life to their families in an foreign scenario where they are discriminated, persecuted by the law enforcement, low wages payment because they are considered "illegal."

For this reason, this celebration turns meaningful and had a strong participation and involvement of the immigrant community. We usually use to have 200 to 300 hundred participants (between parents and children basically). Members of the community in the previous days sign to be sponsors of one day celebration providing hot chocolate and something to eat for all the participants.

The celebration begins with a solemn procession in which the participants hold candles and sing traditional posada songs. The procession will make its way to particular home in our case to the social hall of the church.

After playing games and having some food together we finished the celebration breaking a *piñata*. A piñata is a container often made of papier-mache, in different colors that have seven horns. The symbolic meaning of the horns are the seven capital sins: envy, lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath/anger, and pride. There is a stick which it is used to break the piñata which represents and

symbolizes love. The children hit with the stick the piñata with a cover over their eyes. When finally the piñata is broken they told me that the *grace* of God come in candies, seasonal fruits and cacahuates (peanuts). And all the children jump to pick up as much as they can. After nine days of celebration and joy we returned to our daily lives till next year.

When we talk about *grace* our thoughts goes to analyze a doctrine, but in Augustine and Wesley Grace was an experience and in Wesley was mention not only to his own experience but also on the sphere of the disadvantaged the: poor, working-class laborers, prisoners, immigrants, poor women and children.

To talk about *grace* “of God forgiving sin is ironic for the poor” say Liberation theologian Elsa Tamez.<sup>12</sup> To talk about *grace* we need to turn our gaze to the experience of faith of the excluded and the poor. How our theologies can be sensitive to understand *Grace* that comes in a piñata?

In the first years of the XXI century in which nationalism is growing strongly in the US and in Europe has increment forms of exclusion to immigrants, refugees, women, sexual minorities, children and ethnic groups restricting their human rights and new ways of slavery are being develop. Current ideologies/theologies of patriarchalism and racism has increment as forms to naturalize restricted national policies to dis/Grace social groups I have mention before.

From this dis/Graceful social scenario of our world from the borders a new notion of understanding of Grace comes to us in a *piñata*. In midst of indecent people excluded by Orthodox Christianity emerge the *grace* of God in different expressions of small solidarities among the disgraceful outsiders.

The cross is always a scandal, but as Ivone Gebara a Latinamerican feminist theologian said, “crosses are always present, but also different creative forms of redemption are present too. The Spirit awakens in us this renewed possibility of salvation.”<sup>13</sup>

Grace comes intermingled with the confusion of a dis/Graceful world in small things such as shared a cup of hot chocolate in winter, sign together in our own language, light candles in the middle of the dark nights, and a rain of candies come to our heads are signs of God’s presence and

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<sup>12</sup> Tamez, E. *Contra toda Condena* (1991:157).

<sup>13</sup> Gebara, I. *Out of the depths* (2002:115).

love among us. In other words, “salvation is what helps us live in the present moment, even when it feeds a dream of greater happiness.”<sup>14</sup>

We are living in a world that is turning completely dangerous, *Fundamentalism* is growing in the major world religions, basically in the religions of the book. Where totalitarian theologies of fear, guilt, prosperity are preached and only some are predestinated.

As Wesleyan theologians we need to move forward in our way of doing theology and listen to God who speaks to us in the voices especially of the disadvantaged of this world. The importance of de-centering our theologies and starting not from our notions of Grace but from the victims of dis/Grace in the world and picking the seeds of God’s grace and inclusive love, that the Creator is planting among them to redeem all creation.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 121



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