

The Gift of Grace/Grace That Frees

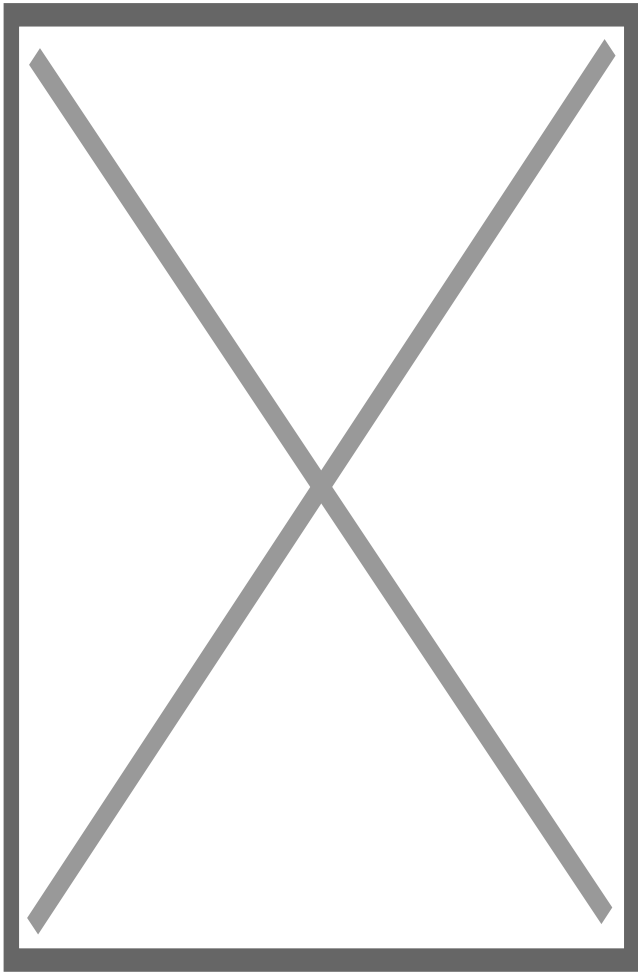
reviewed by [Wayne A. Holst](#) in the [February 21, 2006](#) issue

In Review



The Gift of Grace: The Future of Lutheran Theology

Niels Henrik Gregersen, Bo Holm, Ted Peters and Peter Widmann, eds.
Fortress



Grace That Frees: The Lutheran Tradition

Bradley Hanson
Orbis

Ever since the Reformation, some Lutherans have viewed their faith as a renewal movement within the church catholic. For them, Lutheranism does not exist exclusively or primarily as a distinct church but represents the recovered theological and spiritual tradition of earliest Christianity, and it has gifts to enhance the whole church.

Time and circumstances have transformed the lively Lutheran reform tradition of medieval, European Christendom. Parts of the modern global communion of Lutheran churches—especially in Europe and North America—show signs of aging, particularly in comparison to their missionary progeny in the global South. Older Lutherans appear to have compromised their renewing, evangelizing edge, and what was once a unique and vibrant movement has fossilized and sometimes seems out of touch with modern realities. Still, over the centuries some followers of Luther have continued to view their mission as one of serving the whole church and the world in which it exists. *The Gift of Grace* and *Grace That Frees* are representative of that intention.

In an essay in *The Gift of Grace*, Kenneth Inskeep captures the current predicament: “We seem passionate when rehashing past debates where we have certainty, while succumbing to an intellectual malaise when addressing present missiological challenges.”

Indeed, life in contemporary northern Lutheranism survives in a “reactive reform” stance half a millennium after Luther posted his arguments on the Wittenberg church door and boldly testified at Worms. Modern Lutherans seem also to have lost the magical spell cast half a century ago by German Lutheran theologians Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich.

Lutherans in Europe and America live, theologically and spiritually, in a postconfessional and postcolonial world. Domestically and on the global scene, they have largely conceded Protestant ascendancy to movements like conservative evangelicalism and Pentecostalism. Richard H. Bliese, president of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, comments: “Lutherans respond . . . with critique. We adapt, adjust . . . react while others innovate. Frequently Lutherans . . . borrow ideas and strategies . . . to make them palatable and ‘more Lutheran.’”

Remaking missiologies by forcing them through the sieve of Lutheran hermeneutics isn’t always a bad theological program, Bliese avers. Lutherans can do this and be ecumenical and open rather than parochial and sectarian. But gone, it seems, are the classical Lutheran glory days of bold ideas and creative actions. “Reform as a permanent theological posture is insufficient for mission vitality,” Bliese asserts. “Every church must discover, finally, some basis for its own tradition’s missiological genius”—its continuing reason for being. “The key for Lutheran missiology in the future” is to move from “reactive reform” to “innovative initiative.”

The Gift of Grace is a collection of papers presented at an international convocation on the future of Lutheran theology held at Aarhus University in Denmark in January 2003. Its editors emphasize that the book’s major thrust is not Lutheran identity per se, but Lutheran charisms in service to the whole church. Drawing from a rich gathering of perspectives, volume editor Niels Gregersen postulates ten theses to help guide the future of the Lutheran theological enterprise and to provide a constructive, conciliatory stance for further interconfessional dialogue.

In his fourth thesis, for example, Gregersen argues that Lutheranism does not possess a core theology per se. The doctrine of justification by grace through faith is not exclusively Lutheran and should not be taken as superior to other key Christian doctrines.

By underemphasizing pivotal aspects of Lutheran theological identity and focusing elsewhere, the conferees may have missed an important opportunity to creatively unpack classic Lutheran understandings, strip them of their dated contexts and constructs, and apply them to ecumenical discussions impacting the future. A more innovative approach to the discussion might have been to focus instead on the unique Lutheran understanding of faith. The *grace* in the book’s title is not a term of Reformation disagreement. Each side in that dispute honored *sola gratia*. It was the definition and role of *sola fide* that created controversy.

Bradley Hanson, in *Grace That Frees*, explains that Lutheran spirituality is an essentially ecumenical endeavor, but one that is grounded in its own unique theology. He writes: “Our task is to engage and integrate the classical Christian tradition and the best contemporary resources in a theologically and pastorally responsible fashion.”

Hanson comes closest to recognizing the theological problem I detect when he acknowledges Lutherans’ distrust of viewing faith as a matter of human effort rather than as a divine gift. Lutherans do not believe that it is possible for people to find God on their own, as part of personal spiritual management or the right meditative technique. Faith is a prevenient gift that God alone offers the spiritual devotee. Hanson also reflects on modern, global Lutheran diversity: “Traditionally, Lutheran spirituality was something rational and only then spiritual. . . . Many Third World Lutherans are not so restricted.”

Gregersen suggests a way forward: The capacity for living with contradictions rather than neat, uniform schemata may be an important test for contemporary Lutheran theology and spirituality, and the newly emerging parts of the global Lutheran communion may ultimately be able to help traditional branches of the family to

bridge the seeming impasse.