

Sola Gratia

Darren Kennedy

Grace is one of those superlative words that none of us can fully comprehend in theology. Grace is at the heart of the gospel and a central word for understanding the Christian's experience of Jesus Christ. Paul tells us in Ephesians 2:8, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God." The Reformation cry of "Sola Gratia" or grace alone testifies to the passionate love and powerful action of the Triune God for us and for our salvation.

As we celebrate 500 years since Martin Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses on the door in Wittenberg, we are prompted again to look with joy and wonder at God's goodness and unmerited favor towards us. The theological implications of a word like "grace" are numerous and we will not exhaust them tonight. Nevertheless, I am grateful for this opportunity to focus on one of the great realities of Christian theology. Throughout this talk, I will focus primarily on the work and theology of two of the greatest Reformers: Martin Luther and John Calvin.

The Reformers discovered that the concept of grace centrally described the heart and character of the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Anecdotally, this can be seen in Martin Luther's spiritual journey to become a Reformer. Late in his life, Luther looked back at the way God had transformed him from an anxious and fearful young Augustinian monk into the leader of the Reformation. His mind went to 1519, two years after his Ninety-Five Theses were posted. At the time, Luther wrestled mightily to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans but kept stumbling on the phrase "the righteousness of God" in Romans 1:17. Luther described his crisis this way,

For I hated that word, “the righteousness of God,” which, according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically regarding the formal or active righteousness, as they called it, with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner. Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners...I was angry with God.¹

Several parts of this quotation are notable. First, Luther clearly engaged with the Bible in a profound and reflective way. He attempted to live by the truth he was studying in the scriptures. Luther’s theology was not merely academic but also practical and personal. Second, by thinking of God’s righteousness in this theoretical way that he had been taught, Luther saw the futility of his own good works and literally began to hate the God he was working so hard to please. In essence, the teaching put him on a path that led precisely away from his theological goal. Finally, being written in 1519, we see the difficulty in establishing a precise date for the start of the Reformation. While Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses certainly mark a significant event in the historical process, there were many reforming efforts before October 31, 1517 and—as this quotation reveals—even Luther himself was not yet a fully developed Reformer.

But Luther’s account does not stop there. He goes on to write an eloquent testimony to God’s grace and its impact on his life. Luther wrote,

At last by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, “In it the

¹ Martin Luther, “1545 Preface to Latin Writings” in *Martin Luther: Selections From His Writing*, ed John Dillenberger (New York: Anchor Books, 1962), 11.

righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, “He who through faith is righteous shall live.” There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, “He who through faith is righteous shall live.” Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me.... And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word “righteousness of God.” Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise.²

Obviously, this change had a radical impact on Luther’s life and theology: his mind and his heart. At first, Luther understood justification as a human responsibility judged by the impossible standard given in the “righteousness of God.” In such a framework, the only conclusion was anger and despair. Luther’s breakthrough came in understanding “the righteousness of God” as a gift given by the Gracious God. Far from the angry God Luther had previously imagined, this God of Grace grants “a passive righteousness” to the sinner. In other words, out of God’s gracious love for sinners, He imputes Christ’s righteousness to sinners who could never attain it by their own efforts.

This autobiographical account of Luther shows the tremendous importance of grace in Reformation theology. Like this well-known picture of either two faces or one candlestick, Luther had originally focused so much on one picture of the righteousness of God that he could not see the other one that was right in front of him. Moreover, once the new picture of the gracious God broke through, Luther would spend the rest of his life developing his theology of grace. Luther once summed up

² Ibid., 11-12.

this life theme in a letter to fellow Reformer Philip Melancthon, writing, "...for I seek and thirst only for a gracious God..."³

Imputed Righteousness

As his story indicates, Luther emphasized God's grace in imputing the righteousness of Christ to sinners. In other words, Christians are sinners who are granted the alien righteousness of Christ by grace. Luther explains this idea in his commentary on Galatians by explicating the meaning of "putting on Christ":

...to put Christ on is to put on righteousness, truth, and every grace, and the fulfillment of the whole law...you are righteous...because by believing in Christ you have put on Christ.⁴

Seen in this way, Luther understands Christians as simultaneously both righteous and sinners. They are righteous because God imputes the righteousness of Christ to them in grace, but they have not yet been fully sanctified and continue to battle sin in their lives.

Calvin's theology strongly resembles Luther's in regard to imputed righteousness. Calvin believed that grace immediately brought justification and forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Calvin wrote,

Thus we say, in short, that our righteousness before God is an acceptance, whereby, receiving us into his grace, he regards us as righteous. And we say that this same consists in the remission of sins, and in this: that the righteousness of Jesus Christ is imputed to us.⁵

³ Denis Janz, *The Westminster Handbook to Martin Luther*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 68.

⁴ Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: It's Historical and Systematic Development* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999) 263.

⁵ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., vol. 1 (London: SCM, 1961), III.11.2.

Like Luther, Calvin developed Paul's analogy in Galatians 3:27. Here, the baptized Christian is "clothed in Jesus Christ." The idea is that we are judged on the basis of Christ's righteousness. This righteousness surrounds us like a robe. In contrast with sanctification, justification is complete in an instant. Calvin writes, God "does not justify in part, but so that the faithful, being clothed in the purity of Christ, may dare frankly to appear before heaven."⁶ Peter, the thief on the cross, and all Christians today are all wearing the righteousness of Christ. As such, we all confidently stand before the Judge in Heaven, not because of our good works, but because of Jesus alone. In justification, the focus is not on the person but on the effectual righteousness of Christ. It is also important to remember that we are clothed in Christ by living in union with Him through the power of the Holy Spirit. We do not receive Christ's righteousness apart from our living relationship with God in Christ.

Grace as Relational Rather than Material

To understand Luther's theology of grace properly, attention needs to be given to the philosophical foundations and presuppositions. The Reformers' doctrine of "grace alone" came in contrast to the practices and beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church of their day.

Catholic theology in the sixteenth century never fully abandoned grace as Luther and other Reformers like Calvin readily admitted. The primary debate was not so much the absence of grace in Catholic theology as requiring other things alongside it. In a sermon on Galatians 4:21-26, Calvin explained it this way:

For what is our greatest quarrel with [the Catholics] at this point in time? It concerns free will, meritorious acts of service, satisfaction for sin, and the rest. The [Roman Catholics] say that we can obtain favour in the eyes of

⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.II.11.

God by our own efforts, and that we do not need the aid and assistance of the Holy Spirit. Yes, they admit that there is some collaboration, and that God works within us up to a point; but they say that we are his helpers, and we would be most weak and useless if our virtue did not help us to gain God's favour. They also say that the grace of God is of no effect unless we add to it something of our own doing. Thus, they are building a doctrine based upon merit; the only way you can reach the kingdom of heaven is by pleasing God. You need personal merit in order to pay for the sins you have committed.⁷

Note the way that Calvin concedes that there is a role for the grace of God in Catholic theology. The issue for Calvin and for the rest of the Reformers was centrally about *sola gratia*, with all glory to God and without the addition of human merit. It is not as if the pre-Reformation Church ignored grace entirely, but rather that it added to it. Thus, it became common in the Middle Ages to speak of “faith *and* works” or “grace *and* human effort.” In the view of the Reformers, these additions were really subtractions from and ultimately full negations of God's great gifts to humanity.

The issue here is not a small detail for the Reformers. The theology of grace alone means that God has opened a way for the salvation of sinners based solely on God's gracious work in Jesus Christ. Approaching the throne of grace with empty hands, we claim no credit or agency in our salvation. Luther made the qualitative—not quantitative—distinction on grace alone through the absolute rejection of the slightest contribution of human beings to salvation. In a sermon on Luke 16 given in 1522 Luther claims,

If I were to see heaven standing open and could earn it by picking up a piece of straw, I still would not want to do so; for I would not want to be in a position to say:

⁷ John Calvin, “Freedom from the Bondage of the Law” in *25 Inspiring Sermons: John Calvin*, ed. Simon Turner, (Amazon Digital Services, 2014), Kindle 426-31.

Behold, I have earned it. No, no! Not to my merit but to God be the glory, to God who has sacrificed His Son for me and destroyed my sin and hell.⁸

Luther's point is clear. He takes no credit for God's salvific action in his life. Calvin makes a similar point in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, "Any mixture of the power of free will that men strive to mingle with God's grace is nothing but a corruption of grace."⁹ Calvin is concerned primarily with the attribution of power or effectuality to the human will *in abstraction* or apart from God.

One reason for this key conflict was that the scholastic Catholic way of speaking about grace as "an infused power" or "a habit or a virtue that enables us to fulfill the law in a meritorious way."¹⁰ In each of these cases, grace is materialized rather than dynamically relational. One of the great rediscoveries of the Reformation was a personal and relational understanding of grace, which was shift away from a material understanding. We see this in the Reformed Confessions of the sixteenth century. Jan Rohls contrasts the two traditions this way:

Contrary to Scholasticism's understanding of grace as a disposition of character (*habitus*), grace is not viewed here as a specific property or disposition, which is communicated to human beings. Instead, grace is a quality of divine relational behavior toward human beings as sinners.¹¹

Seen as the loving "relational behavior" of God towards sinners, it is not surprising that Calvin so often writes of grace in terms of

⁸ Martin Luther, *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, vol. II, ed. Weald M. Plass, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 923.

⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.5.15.

¹⁰ Janz, *The Westminster Handbook to Martin Luther*, 69.

¹¹ Jan Rohls, *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen*, trans. Jeff Hoffmeyer (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 119-120.

God's "fatherly goodness." Likewise, we hear an echo of Luther's lifelong delight in seeking the Gracious God.

This is a crucial key to understanding biblical concepts of grace that remains challenging for the church today, and we must be vigilant to keep grace in its primarily relational framework. John Leith explains,

Christian theology has always faced the temptation to materialize grace into a thing. Over against materialization of grace the first Protestants were adamant. Hence they refused to think of grace as some infused quality. Grace is God's personal engagement of human beings. God is related to human beings as free, moral, historical persons.¹²

Note how Leith emphasizes the relational encounter of God with fully human persons. In this way, grace cannot be separated from the Gracious God. One of the challenging aspects of understanding the Reformation's claim of *sola gratia* rests in properly understanding the nature or reality of grace itself.

Even in Protestant churches today, it can be easy to slip back into thinking of grace in material terms. In this view, grace seems to fuel the Christian life just as gas fuels a car. While we might be given the "gas" as a gift, we quickly move on and enjoy the gift apart from the giver. There are numerous reasons why this analogy fails, but the biggest problem is that it imagines a separation between the gift (grace) and the giver of that gift (God). Luther and Calvin both strongly opposed such an understanding of grace. Luther explains, "...faith justifies because it takes hold of and possesses this treasure, the present Christ."¹³ Calvin makes this connection even more explicit in his

¹² John Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 221.

¹³ Martin Luther, "Lectures on Galatians" in *Luther's Works*, vol. 26 trans. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), 130.

consistent description of the Christian in “union with Christ.” Christians united to Christ by the Holy Spirit, Calvin explains, can never attempt to separate grace or salvation from God himself, for “...the Lord Jesus never gives anyone the enjoyment of his benefits save in giving himself.”¹⁴ Here again, we cannot imagine that grace, salvation or any other benefit of Christ is a “thing” or “gift” that might be enjoyed apart from the person of Jesus Christ himself. Clearly, the living, relational presence of Christ cannot be missing in the Reformation understanding of grace.

Both Martin Luther and John Calvin strongly opposed materialized views. Instead, they argued that grace was about God’s personal, relational interaction with human persons. Luther makes the concept clear in a comment on Psalm 51:

Grace signifies that favor with which God receives us, forgiving our sins and justifying us freely (gratis) through Christ. Do not consider it a quality (in man), as the sophists dream it is.¹⁵

Note Luther’s use of active, relational verbs in describing God’s grace. God receives, forgives, and justifies us freely through Christ.

Such a view of grace clearly demands a dynamic and living God as an active agent. The idea of grace begins with the heart of God not the human recipient. As Paul writes in Romans 5:8-10, “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us... For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled will we be saved by his life.” In this relational framework, the focus remains fully on the active love of God for sinners: that is grace. The doctrine of grace testifies to this enemy-loving God who does not love because of

¹⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.16.1.

¹⁵ Luther, *What Luther Says*, 603.

something inherent in the sinner but because of the loving heart of God.

Not a Denial of the Integrity of Human Action

One of the most persistent arguments against *sola gratia* and the celebration of God's grace alone is the claim that it robs humanity of any role in salvation and at times seems to deny the reality of human action. Often, our modern minds want to carve out a place, even a small place, for our own freedom *apart from God*. Typically, many people want to emphasize God's grace but only in cooperation with the individual's acceptance of Christ. In this view, one might imagine that God's grace is responsible for 99 percent of the work of salvation while human beings activate that work with a 1 percent contribution of effort as a causal agent in choosing Christ. The Reformers rejected this scheme, arguing that grace alone was a qualitative claim in the Bible and not merely a quantitative proportion. Robert Jenson summarizes this logic well,

There is indeed no escaping the logic: if at any step or stage of spiritual life my choice or action determines whether or not I am in fact to be sanctified, then indeed that is what it does, and God's role can only be to confirm my choice. Which is to say, God's grace is not free, and so is neither God nor grace.¹⁶

Jenson's comment illustrates the crucial importance of grace alone in Reformation theology because it is connected intimately to the freedom of God and therefore God's ability to rescue us from sin and death.

While every one of the Reformers preached and taught with the hopeful expectation that people would profess Christian faith, they refused the claim that such a profession or choice

¹⁶ Robert W. Jenson, *On Thinking the Human: Resolutions of Difficult Notions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), Kindle 409-14.

contributed to or causes our salvation. Calvin argues against precisely this view in his commentary on Ephesians 2:8-10:

Let godly readers weigh carefully the apostle's words. He does not say that we are assisted by God. He does not say that the will is prepared, and is then left to run by its own strength. He does not say that the power of choosing aright is bestowed upon us, and that we are afterwards left to make our own choice. Such is the idle talk in which those persons who do their utmost to undervalue the grace of God are accustomed to indulge.¹⁷

Calvin explicitly explains that Paul's argument does not allow for God to merely infuse the human capacity to choose salvation in Christ and then let us "make our own choice." This comment requires at least two clarifications. First, as stated above, grace is not a power, material, or thing that God offers apart from the dynamic relationship He has with His people. We experience the grace of God in and through a living relationship with Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Christ and his benefits, including grace and salvation, are always experienced together. Jesus is not like Santa Claus who carries a bag of gifts around the world but leaves them for children to enjoy when he is gone. No, all the grace that we enjoy as Christians is inextricably bound to the living God in Jesus Christ. Second, Calvin's logic does not imply that the human choice to accept and follow Christ is unimportant; rather, he is simply arguing that it does not cause or contribute to salvation.

Here, I would like to suggest a clarification of vocabulary. In relation to salvation, the term "grace alone" indicates that God alone offers Himself to broken human beings who are dead in their sin and totally incapable of saving themselves or even contributing to their salvation. This Gracious God does not do this based on anything outside of Himself but based only on the

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, ed. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 229.

loving heart of God revealed in Jesus Christ. The dramatic and glorious news of the gospel is that while we were utterly dead in our sin (Ephesians 2:1, 5; Colossians 2:13), incapable of comprehending our need of salvation, much less earning that salvation, God acts on behalf of his enemies (Romans 5:8-10). In grace, God reveals himself to be our loving father rather than a wrathful judge. In terms of agency, God alone brings about our salvation by grace alone so that none of us may boast (Ephesians 2:9). Here, in grace alone, God acts in love through Jesus Christ and is the sole agent bringing about salvation. When we talk of causality, there is no room for a human contribution. It is God's grace alone.

So far, I have argued that the vocabulary of human "causality" is prohibited by the biblical and Reformation proclamation of grace alone. Nevertheless, I want to suggest that humanity does have a "role" in God's salvific work. The Reformers followed Augustine in stressing that grace alone does not diminish the importance and integrity of human action. John Leith explains,

Augustine, Luther, and Calvin knew quite well that, if from one perspective salvation is 100 percent the work of God, from another perspective it is truly a human act; yet it is a human act that is elicited by divine grace. Apart from the affirmation of the integrity of a human act, the doctrine of prevenient grace, of grace alone, of irresistible grace, became destructive of the human person.¹⁸

Leith's words helps to order and explicate the theology of grace. It is precisely the amazing grace of God that transforms the human heart in loving relationship and calls forth love and acceptance from the human. In this sense, there is certainly a role for the human being. As the Canons of Dort explain, "[Grace]

¹⁸ Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine*, 222-3.

does not act in people as if they were blocks and stones”¹⁹ The question is not if there is a role for human beings in salvation or not, there is. At the very least, the sentence “God saves us by grace” gives us the role of the direct object of God’s action. In the case of the direct object of this sentence, “us” is necessary but not causal.

But the role of Christians in both justification and sanctification is more than this. God’s invitation into union with Christ transforms us in a living relationship that manifests itself in words and actions. Let me return for a moment to my simple automobile analogies. I would suggest that free human actions play a role that is similar to the exhaust of a running automobile. Just as no one can argue that the exhaust of a car causes it to run, so also are we prohibited from thinking that our decisions or actions cause our salvation. Nevertheless, a car necessarily produces exhaust due to the combustion that takes place within its running engine. In the same way Christians naturally and freely live out a life of proclamation and service in the dynamic of God’s gracious salvation.

The Reformers continually and tirelessly called people to faith and action because they understood that these were essential elements of Christian life. They did not do this because they thought that they were causing salvation but in thankful obedience to the grace of God in Jesus Christ. For both Luther and Calvin, the Christian life of grace was a lively, active, and passionate adventure. According to the Reformers, grace empowers humans and grants them true freedom in relation to Christ. Listen to Luther’s description of the Christian life of faith:

Oh, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith; and so it is impossible for it not to do good works incessantly. It does not ask whether there are good works to

¹⁹ 'Canons of the Synod of Dort,' in *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, vol. II, part 4, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss (London: Yale University Press, 2003), 587.

do, but before the question rises, it has already done them, and is always at the doing of them.²⁰

Clearly, such an active life does not make Christian individuals into mindless pieces on a chessboard. The key theological issue is one of cause and effect. Luther explains, “We do not become righteous by doing righteous deeds but, having been made righteous, we do righteous deeds.”²¹ Similarly, Calvin states that good works are “the fruit and effect of grace.”²²

Perhaps one of the most convincing proofs of Calvin’s affirmation of human action can be found in the lives of Christians seeking to live out their Christian discipleship according to his theology. A recent scholar described Calvin’s legacy this way:

He formed an especially dynamic type of western Christianity in which faith in the efficacy of divine grace in no way limits the intensity of human striving, but powerfully stimulates it, and in which a strong consciousness of sin is connected with a no less tenacious struggle to be virtuous. From this resulted, not least of all, an ethos of work and vocation as a divine calling.²³

My prayer is that all of us would experience and live out grace here in the Middle East today.

²⁰ Martin Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, Trans. J. Theodore Mueller (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1976), xvii.

²¹ Martin Luther, “Disputation against Scholastic Theology, 1517” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 31, trans. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 12.

²² Calvin, *Institutes* II.3.13.

²³ Alexandre Ganoczy, ‘Calvin’s Life’ in *Cambridge Companion to John Calvin* ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 24.

Conclusion

As I conclude, I would like to address a subtle irony. In our celebration of 500 years since Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door in Wittenberg, we are addressing five "only" or "alone" statements. The difficulty here is that the essential meaning of only or alone precludes everything else, even other "only" statements. I think the Reformers' understanding of grace helps us to understand how these statements actually work and actually work together.

I have argued that "grace" for Luther, Calvin, and other Reformers was not a thing but a person or relationship with Jesus Christ himself. In this definition, "Grace alone" necessarily means "Christ alone." Likewise, we experience this gracious Christ through our God-given faith. Here again, to say "grace alone" immediately leads us to understanding "faith alone" as the only way to experience the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Turning to the Bible, this radical and revolutionary story of the Gracious God revealed in Jesus Christ can only be found where God alone guarantees to meet us – that is, in the words of Holy Scripture. Luther himself struggled all of his life to grasp this unfathomable grace and it was only in the bedrock promises of the Bible that this truth could be found, again and again. If these Reformation claims are true, then there simply is no place for any of us to boast, for it is to God that all glory must be given. In this sense, each one of these "only" statements is vitally connected to the others. They are as glorious, inspiring, and wonderful as they were 500 years ago when Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses.

Darren Kennedy is a professor of theology at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo.