

Grace alone

“Eternal life is, at one and the same time, grace and the reward given by God for good works and merit.”ⁱ What do you think of those words? They were issued by the Vatican shortly before the adoption, in 1999, by the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican, of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. So a federation of Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church declare that they have reached consensus on the doctrine of justification shortly after the Vatican has issued a statement reasserting its historic position on the way of salvation: “eternal life is, at one and the same time, grace and the reward given by God for good works and merit.” On the basis of these words, I would conclude that the Declaration of consensus on the doctrine of justification was a bit premature. Add to this statement the fact that the Roman Catholic Church has not changed its position since the time of the Reformation on purgatory, indulgences, penance, prayers to the saints, works of supererogation and the treasury of merits and I think it is safe to say that the Declaration was not just premature. It was untrue.

You have invited me to speak on the topic “Grace Alone.” Obviously, this slogan is meant to express the monergistic nature of salvation in Christianity. In other words, God saves us, He alone, and we do not save ourselves. And he does this according to His grace, his underserved kindness, not in response to our works. Grace alone! One of the most important watchwords of the Reformation.

And this teaching that we are saved from God’s wrath and punishment purely and alone by God’s undeserved kindness for the sake of His Son Jesus Christ, is no less important today than it was at the time of the Reformation. And it is no less timely. And it is not only in the Roman Catholic Church that we find a poor understanding of this precious teaching that we are saved by grace alone, without any merit or worthiness on our part. We find serious misunderstandings of what grace actually is also in the Reformed churches. And I am sad to say, even in some of our Lutheran churches the appreciation for the teaching that our salvation is due only to God’s infinite grace in Christ His Son seems to have eroded.

Therefore, it is always appropriate to revisit this topic. Thank you for giving me that opportunity this evening. Obviously, this is a huge topic. One could take a lifetime talking about it. This evening I just want to cover a few aspects of this topic.

- The context in which we talk about grace.

- Grace alone in the Lutheran Confessions.
- The denial of grace by Rome. This will be brief since most Lutherans are fairly well aware of our differences with Rome.
- The denial of grace by the Reformed.
- Finally, the teaching about grace among Lutherans.

First let's flesh out the theological context in which we talk about grace. We begin with a definition of the word: The Greek word which we normally translate as "grace" is the word *χάρις*. It can be translated grace or kindness or mercy or goodwill. When we find the word referring to God's way of saving us, we normally translate it grace, which can further be defined as undeserved favor or kindness. It is a gift, not something we deserve. God forgives us for our sins freely, without any merit or worthiness in us. But it is not an arbitrary grace, whereby God declares, "Well, they are evil but I will forgive them anyway?" No God's grace toward us is located in the person of Jesus, His Son. God is gracious to us only on account of Christ and apart from Christ there is no grace. Apart from Christ we will encounter only God's wrath, never His kindness. But on account of Christ and because of what He has done for us in His life, suffering, death and resurrection, God is gracious to us, that is, he forgives us, he is no longer angry at us, he saves us and gives us eternal life. Finally, we must talk about faith. How does God's grace become ours? Through faith in Jesus. Although Jesus has already done everything necessary to save us, the benefits of what He has done become ours only through faith. But even here it is by grace since faith itself is a gift of God.

As we who are Lutherans consider this topic of grace alone, let us begin by going back to those confessions which defined the Lutheran position at the time of the Reformation. You remember the major emphases of the Reformation. Grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone, Christ alone. That word "alone" is an important word, isn't it, in the history of the Lutheran Church? I would like to focus on Melancthon's use of that word in his *Apology to the Augsburg Confession*.

Apology, Article IV deals with the topic of justification – justification by grace for Christ's sake through faith. Melancthon says in *Apology IV* "For through Christ we come to the Father."ⁱⁱ The entire article is meant to demonstrate this simple truth. Melancthon is insisting that justification is unconditional, that is, it is by grace for Christ's sake through faith.

Melancthon points out that the opponents of the Reformation objected to the Lutheran use of the Latin word *sola* which we translate either 'alone' or 'only'. The Lutherans used the word *sola*, of course, in reference to faith or to Christ or to faith in Christ or to grace and they always used that word *sola* to exclude human works.ⁱⁱⁱ The

word *sola* is an exclusionary word, meant to teach that works have no part in our justification. We are justified only by the merits of Christ, only through faith in Christ, only by grace, not by grace and works. This word *sola* appears so frequently in Article IV of the *Apology* that one cannot help but notice. In fact, it appears no less than 50 times.

Another exclusionary word used by Melanchthon in this article is the Latin word *gratis* which in English is rendered 'freely' or 'free' or in two instances 'gratis'. Our English word 'grace' comes from this Latin root. Anyway, by insisting that the forgiveness of sins is given to us 'freely' for Christ's sake, Melanchthon again excludes human works as a cause of justification. The Latin word *gratis* is used no less than 43 times in the *Apology*. I looked back to *Augsburg Confession*, Article IV, of which *Apology IV* is intended to be an explanation or expansion or commentary. (In other words, if we wish to know what is meant by Article IV of the *Augsburg Confession*, it is not difficult to determine that. Just read Article IV of the *Apology*.) I discovered that the word *sola* does not appear in Article IV of the *Augsburg Confession* at all and the word *gratis* is used only once. Article IV of the *Augsburg Confession* is 87 words. The *Apology* uses the words free, freely, only, alone, that is *sola* and *gratis*, at least 93 times. When you look at the use of these words *sola* and *gratis* in the *Apology*, you realize that they are used so often, they are in their combined usage longer than the entire article in the *Augsburg Confession* and the word *gratis* is used only once there, and *sola* not at all.

What's the point? The point is this. The article of justification is laid out simply and concisely in the *Augsburg Confession*. Briefly, yet with extreme clarity Melanchthon explains justification. When he wrote the *Augsburg Confession*, there was hope on the part of the Lutherans that the force of such a clear and powerful statement would actually convince their opponents that the Lutherans were no heretics, but were only fighting for those truths which the Church had always cherished. But this simple and clear statement concerning how man is made righteous before God was condemned by the Roman confutation because it excluded human merit from justification. In the *Apology*, it is as though Melanchthon is saying, "Since you didn't get the point the first time, I will now make it extremely clear." He then uses these exclusionary words *sola* and *gratis* again and again so that no doubt could possibly remain concerning the cause of justification. Melanchthon's use in *Apology IV* of the phrase, *Lex Semper Accusat*, (the law always accuses), is meant to accomplish precisely the same effect and to exclude all human merit. Through the persistent use of this refrain, *Lex Semper Accusat*, Melanchthon means to drive all those to despair who continue to look in hope to human ability or virtue or anything else in man as a cause or partial cause for the achievement of righteousness before God.

Another device used frequently by Melanchthon to underline the nature of grace is his twofold emphasis on the glory of Christ and the need for comfort for sinful human beings. This two-fold emphasis is seen not only in *Apology IV*, but also in Melanchthon's *Loci Communes*. Both emphases are meant to exclude all works, the first by glorifying Christ as the sole Redeemer who without such glory is simply marginalized to the periphery of the article of justification, the second by insisting that unless Christ alone be seen as the cause of justification, sinners will be deprived of all comfort and in the end will be able only to despair. This latter concern of Melanchthon's, expressing his care for the sheep of Christ's flock is one of which we ought today to take special note for it is one which is frequently lost in the frantic ecumenical scramble for "fellowship" and union. Over and over again Melanchthon stresses that sinners must not be deprived of comfort. When this biblical teaching that we are saved by grace alone, without the works of the law, when this teaching is obscured, faith is damaged, weakened and even lost. Therefore, it is not because we have some idolatrous love of pure doctrine that we insist on the purity of the teaching of salvation by grace; it is because of our love for the church, our love for the world, our sincere desire that people may be comforted by the precious news of the Gospel which alone can bring them into fellowship with God.

As one reads through *Apology IV*, it is interesting to note that the exclusionary terms Melanchthon uses to eliminate works as a cause of justification are frequently bunched together. Thus the word *sola* may appear a number of times in succession within a single sentence or a few sentences. The same occurs with the word *gratis*. It is as though Melanchthon got carried away and simply could not help but repeat these exclusionary words again and again. Melanchthon uses this same technique of repetition for the sake of emphasis on at least one occasion in the *Apology* with the Latin word *semper* "always."

Christ remains the mediator. We must **always** be sure that for his sake we have a gracious God in spite of our unworthiness.... Forgiveness is **always** received by faith. Thus also the imputation of the righteousness of the Gospel is through the promise. Therefore it is **always** received by faith; we must **always** hold that we are accounted righteous by faith for the sake of Christ. If those who are regenerated are supposed later to believe that they will be accepted because they have kept the law, how can our conscience be sure that it pleases God, since we never satisfy the law? Therefore we must **always** go back to the promise.^{iv}

After spending some time considering Melanchthon's use of the words "alone," "only," "freely" and "always," I cannot help but think that Melanchthon took particular satisfaction in a single sentence in the section in Article IV entitled "Reply to the

opponents' arguments. There he writes very concisely, "...justification is something that is **only** promised **freely** because of Christ, and therefore it is **always** received before God by faith **alone**."^v Two *solas*, one *gratis* and one *semper*.

Melanchthon's language in his *Loci Communes* and especially in Article IV of the *Apology* is very carefully chosen. His intention is to comfort sinners with the Gospel. To do this he must exclude all works, indeed he must exclude everything but Christ as the hope for sinners. Faith must be pointed to Him alone. Salvation must be by grace alone.

Melanchthon's use of these exclusionary words, *sola* and *gratis*, is something the church should emulate today. Because although it is true that much has happened in both the Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches since the time of the Reformation, it is nevertheless also true that the doctrinal differences that divided us then, still divide us today and these differences all impinge upon our understanding of the concept of grace.

The doctrine of purgatory where one atones for the sins committed in this life in order to pay for the temporal penalties of sin is contrary to the doctrine of grace alone. The doctrine and practice of penance by Rome in which a person will be directed to say certain prayers or do certain good deeds in order to atone for the temporal penalties of sins committed and thus avoid time in purgatory is contrary to the doctrine of grace alone. The Roman view of the mass in which the priest offers Christ as an unbloody sacrifice to the Father for the sins of the living and the dead is contrary to the doctrine of grace alone. And we could go on to speak of indulgences, the treasury of merits and so on.

But we should not think that it is only in Rome that we find teachings that violate the Scripture's message of salvation by grace alone. Such teachings are prominent also in the Reformed churches and in our case in the United States, among the so-called Evangelicals. When it is taught that Baptism is something we do to show our commitment to God and our love for Him, this is not only to transform a gift of God into a human work, it is also to deprive us of the grace God pours out in Holy Baptism. In Acts 2:38-39 the Apostle Peter speaks of a twofold blessing of Baptism – the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. But when Baptism no longer focuses on what God does for us and becomes instead a sign of our obedience to Him, these precious gifts are lost and God's people are deprived of His grace.

A number of years ago, I served as chairman of our Synod's Colloquy Committee. I was responsible for arranging interviews with pastors who wished to leave their church bodies and become pastors in the Missouri Synod. One of the applicants was a pastor in the Reformed Church in America. In one of my questions to him, I pointed out that in his church people do not attend the Lord's Supper to receive the body and blood of Jesus or

to receive the forgiveness of sins. “Why then do they go?” I asked him. “It is a pious act of obedience out of love for Jesus,” was his answer. So in the Reformed Church in America, and this is true of all Reformed churches, the Sacrament of the Altar has been transformed from a gift of God’s grace in which He gives us the forgiveness of sins, into a pious human act of obedience. Something God does for us has been transformed into something we do for God. Gospel has become law, third use of the Law, but law nevertheless. And in the process God’s people have been deprived of their inheritance; they have been deprived of grace.

And it is not only in regard to the Sacraments that people are being deprived of God’s grace. In American Evangelicalism, synergism is rampant when it comes to the doctrine of conversion. And American Evangelicals have managed to turn this gracious work of God in which the Holy Spirit brings people into the church into another pious human work. Permit me to quote the most well-known American Evangelical, Billy Graham. In his book, *How To Be Born Again*, Graham describes faith:

Faith is first of all belief – belief that Christ was who He said He was. Second, faith is belief that He can do what He claimed He could do – He can forgive me and come into my life. Third, faith is trust, an act of commitment, in which I open the door of my heart to Him. In the New Testament the words “faith,” “belief,” and “believe,” are translations of similar Greek words so they are interchangeable. Placing your faith in Christ meant that first you must make a choice. The Scripture says, “Whoever believes in Jesus is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son (John 3:18). The person who believes is not condemned; the person who has not believed is condemned. In order not to be condemned you must make a choice – you must choose to believe.^{vi}

Thus faith is transformed from a gracious work of God performed by the Holy Spirit working through the Word into an intellectual decision or choice of the human will. As in the case of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, the Gospel is turned into the Law. And, of course, what Billy Graham teaches is not new. He simply follows in the footsteps of the American Evangelicals who lived before him.

A preacher named Walter Scott (1796-1861) spoke about the three things that man does in connection with becoming a Christian and the three things God does.

In summary it was:

1. Faith consists in accepting the proposition (which Scott called “the golden oracle”) that “Jesus is the Christ.”
2. If faith is genuine, repentance follows logically (one may almost say, automatically), motivated by Christ’s authoritative promises.

3. Baptism for the remission of sins is obedient response to the Lord's command, making one's commitment complete. These are the three things for a man to do.
4. The remission of sins is the fulfillment of God's promise, as are
5. The gift of the Holy Spirit and eternal life. These are the three things God does.^{vii}

It was as simple as that. And many people embraced it for its simplicity. It is said that for thirty years Scott alone managed to "convert" a thousand people a year through his preaching. Notice, faith, repentance, Baptism – all these are turned into pious works that we do rather than the gracious acts of God which He does for us and in us. And in the process, what is lost? Grace is lost. It is turned into works and so disappears. As the Apostle Paul writes to the Romans (11:6), "If by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work."

Now perhaps all that I have said this evening is pretty elementary Christian and Lutheran doctrine. I shouldn't even need to explain it, right? But recent experience tells me otherwise. I do a lot of traveling and I frequently get to hear sermons and Bible classes presented by others, and these are Lutherans. I must admit, I am frequently distressed, not so much by what I hear as by what I do not hear. In sermons, in Bible Classes, in the public square, in private conversations, more and more I hear people speaking in justification terms, but with little or no reference to the person of Jesus. Thus I hear sermons that proclaim salvation through *grace* alone, but with no reference to the atoning work of Jesus, the Son of God, who is, after all, the only source of grace. I hear frequent reference in Bible Classes or in talks to *forgiveness*. "God is love and He forgives us." But more often than not there will be no explanation at all of the fact that forgiveness is the application of the merits of Jesus to the sinner. I hear numerous expressions of hope that God's *peace* will come to people. Yet, again, repeatedly the concept that God has been reconciled to us and that He is at peace with us remains separated from the proclamation that only through the suffering and death of the Son of God can God's anger be assuaged and the enmity between God and man taken away. I hear sermons and lectures given on God's *love* for us but with no reference to the fact that the expression of His love toward us is proclaimed in the sending of His Son so that whoever believes in Him might not perish but have eternal life. In other words, it appears that among many the proclamation of the Gospel is becoming more and more unclear and therefore the understanding of God's grace is becoming less certain. Perhaps it is because in many seminaries, pastors being trained for the ministry are taking less courses in biblical theology and more sociology courses, socio-political

courses, administration, counseling, etc. Perhaps pastors are spending so much time on the internet, they don't have the time to adequately prepare. Perhaps pastors are not being taught how to teach. I don't really know the reason for what I have experienced. But I do know that when our attention in our preaching and teaching is not focused intensely on the person of Jesus, who is the Savior, the message of grace alone will not be heard.

Let me make two more observations about the preaching of the Gospel and the message of grace alone. The Gospel has not been preached if somebody preaches about Jesus but does not tell me that because of what Jesus has done, I have been forgiven. It is fine and good to preach about the Trinity, the two natures in Christ, Jesus' threefold office, Jesus' miracles, his death, his resurrection. But all of this helps me little if I do not know that everything He did He did to bring me forgiveness. That's what grace is all about – the forgiveness of sins. Martin Luther says in his Small Catechism, "Where there is forgiveness of sins, there is life and salvation." Conversely, where there is no forgiveness of sins, there is no life and salvation. I am a sinner. I need forgiveness. It is not enough to preach about Jesus. I need to hear that he came to forgive me. Without the knowledge of this forgiveness, I will not know about God's grace. Jesus may be portrayed as a wonderful example, a powerful worker of signs and wonders, a prophet, a preacher, a king, yes, He may be portrayed as the very Son of God Himself and the second person of the eternal and all-powerful and all-glorious Trinity. But none of this information helps me unless I know that I am forgiven. I am a sinner. I need forgiveness. Without forgiveness, I will stand before God clothed in my own sin and guilt and shame and I will despair. I am a sinner. Please give me forgiveness. Don't preach to me about Jesus without telling me why He came – namely to forgive me and to save me and to bring me to everlasting life.

Secondly, don't talk to me about forgiveness without talking to me about Jesus as the source of that forgiveness. God does not forgive in some abstract way apart from Jesus. The only forgiveness spoken of in Scripture is a forgiveness that comes through Jesus. Jesus Himself says, "You search the Scriptures because you think you have eternal life in them and they testify about me." He is the heart, soul and center of the Bible and the Bible was written in order that you and I might hear its message, read its message and learn that through Jesus we are forgiven. Forgiveness comes only through Him. We believe in salvation by grace alone, but there is no grace apart from Him. Only Jesus is the Son of God who took on human flesh to be the Savior of the world. Only Jesus kept the law perfectly as our substitute when we could not do it. Only Jesus took upon Himself your guilt and mine and went to the cross bearing our shame and dying the death that belonged to you and me and should have been ours. Only Jesus was

punished for the sins of all the world. Only Jesus raised Himself to life again that all who believe in Him might rise from death to life. All of these things are necessary for our salvation and only Jesus has done these things. Nobody else has done any of these things and therefore it is only Jesus who has the power to give eternal life to all who believe in Him. Forgiveness is available only through Him. So please don't preach to me about forgiveness unless you preach to me about the one who brings it. The doctrine of grace is incomprehensible apart from the teaching of forgiveness and the doctrine of grace is impossible without the person and work of Christ.

The Apostle Paul says in his letter to the Galatians. (6:14) "Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." We boast in Christ, our joy is in Christ. But this boasting and this joy, you will notice, are not in Jesus' miracles, they are not in His wise teaching, they are not in His fine example. They are in His cross because in His cross we find forgiveness. That's what He was doing there, taking our sin upon Himself and taking it away. We are sinners, we know it, every one of us, but in His cross we find everything we need because we find forgiveness and where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also... yes, life and salvation. This is what it means to believe in salvation by grace alone. It means we have Christ, the Son of God, and having him we have forgiveness for all of our sins, eternal life in God's kingdom and salvation forever from every evil of body and soul.

By Pastor Daniel Preus

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Soli Deo Gloria

ⁱ *Ecumenical News International*, ENI News Service, June 25, 1998.

ⁱⁱ *The Book of Concord*, Theodore Tappert, ed., (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959) p. 126. All subsequent references to this edition of the Lutheran Confessions will be abbreviated "Tappert."

ⁱⁱⁱ Tappert, 117.

^{iv} Tappert, 129. Although the German text uses the word "allein," the Latin, is the original and uses the word "semper." Bolding added.

^v *Ibid*, bolding added.

^{vi} Billy Graham, *How to be Born Again*, (Thomas Nelson, 1989), p. 160.

^{vii} Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 450.