

## **Grace Alone: Salvation as a Gift of God**

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### **About the Author**

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### **Introduction**

*Grace Alone* is Carl Trueman's contribution to *The 5 Solas Series*. In this book, Trueman explores the meaning and significance of *sola gratia*, grace alone. His treatment is biblical, theological, and historical. Trueman also applies the doctrine of grace alone to the life of the church and contemporary practice.

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### **Summary**

#### **Chapter 1**

#### **Grace in the Bible**

The Scriptures alone are our final authority, so we must see what the Bible teaches about grace. God's grace permeates the Bible. Grace is the unmerited favor of God. Saving grace brings salvation, and common grace brings non-salvific blessings to the undeserving. God's work in the church for salvation and the maturing of his children is also grace. Grace is not a proper attribute of God's nature, but a relational application of his character to sinners. God chooses to be gracious and merciful to the rebellious. God's grace is tied to and administered through his covenants. Israel's early identity was shaped by God's gracious redemption of them from slavery in Egypt, and it was God's grace that allowed Israel to have peace and be blessed. The sacrificial system was designed by God. Grace does not mean that sin is ignored—sacrifice, blood, and atonement are necessary. The sacrificial system itself was established by God as a gracious gift. Even before the Mosaic law, however, God had demonstrated that sacrifice was necessary for sin, and that God himself would ultimately provide the substitutionary atonement. Prayers for

grace often focused on the temple and sacrifice, since that's where God's grace was displayed and that's where sin was dealt with. Psalms shows us the need of grace, that we are to cry out for grace, and that grace is foundational for our relationship with God. The prophets proclaim the grace of God, with Isaiah reaching the heights by seeing the connection between God's grace and the substitutionary work of the Servant of the Lord.

Jesus Christ brings all of the lines of OT grace together and is the highest manifestation of God's favor. Jesus is the fulfillment of God's plan in the OT, and as the perfect high priest he offers himself as a perfect sacrifice for our sins. This is incredible grace. Christ is so important that he also brings about a new creation, inaugurating the new age. Jesus is the embodiment of God's grace. We are dead in trespasses and sins, but in grace God makes us alive. God takes the initiative to elect sinners in Christ to be saved, and those he elects he regenerates by his Spirit and gives them life. God's grace changes us so that we can live holy lives and honor God in our ethics. Grace cleanses and transforms sinners. Benedictions and prayers in the NT highlight that the church exists by God's grace and is entirely dependent upon it.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Grace Narrated: Augustine's *Confessions***

Augustine, the North African bishop who wrote in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, has shaped all subsequent discussions about grace. Augustine has been claimed by many diverse thinkers and denominations as their own. He did not consider grace merely in the abstract—reflections on grace fill his autobiography. We do not find a lot of theological elaboration about grace in the church fathers before Augustine. In *Confessions*, Augustine presents to God a prayer and praise for how God, in grace, saved and transformed Augustine's life. He notes that the human heart is always restless and cannot find repose outside of God. Our sin natures are exhibited even from infancy. Augustine writes about his youthful experience of petty theft, which was motivated by the attraction of simply doing wrong. This illustration of sin is common and relatable, and shows how Augustine's experience of sin is universal. Sin is irrational rebellion and plagues every human heart. We are created to love God, but we love ourselves instead and act like we are God. Sin affects all that we are and damages us in all kinds of ways, leading us deeper into depravity. Augustine tried to find peace in Platonic philosophy, but it was of no avail. In the end he turned to his mother's religion of Christianity. He read verses written by Paul in Romans, and was converted. This was the triumph of God's grace over his sin. Augustine was saved and converted because God did a miracle of grace in his life. God's operation of grace in Augustine was monergistic; Augustine saw that his will was captured by sin and that God had to act in sovereign grace to save. Furthermore, Augustine looked to God's power and grace for sanctifying transformation and victory over sin. Our contemporary culture is experiencing endless distraction and pleasure, but its restlessness will never end until it finds rest in God and forgiveness of sins.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Grace Contested: Augustine versus Pelagius**

Our experience of theological realities normally precedes our ability to articulate the doctrines with full precision. Augustine's *Confessions* was a work of autobiography cast as prayer rather

than a systematic theology. Pelagius objected vehemently to Augustine's prayer "Give what Thou commandest, and command what Thou willest." Pelagius and his followers were convinced that such an attitude destroyed human responsibility and excused moral laxity and failure. Asceticism was growing in the church, and strenuous moral effort was seen as the hallmark of dedicated Christianity. Debates about sin, predestination, and grace were highly divisive in the church. Augustine contended that human free will was lost in Adam's fall, and that genuine freedom came when God restored our ability to love him properly. Pelagius insisted that human beings were born with a perfectly free will, undamaged by Adam's fall. Contra Pelagius' teaching that humans sin because of following a bad moral example, Augustine taught that we inherit Adam's original sin and that we love ourselves more than God. The Holy Spirit works in us to change our hearts and to write God's law upon them, completely changing our orientation. God predestines some to experience this regenerating work of the Holy Spirit—this is a pure gift of grace. Grace does not come on the basis of our foreseen faith, since faith itself is a gift of God's grace. There is great mystery surrounding predestination, but for the Apostle Paul it is a reason to praise God. The election of Jacob and the rejection of Esau—before the twins were born or had done anything bad or good—was a key theological reality for Augustine. After Augustine's death, Pelagianism was condemned, but there was lots of diversity in the church regarding the exact relationship between grace and the human will.

#### **Chapter 4**

#### **Unexpected Ally: Thomas Aquinas**

Many Protestants are unfamiliar with Aquinas, or are suspicious of him as a Roman Catholic theologian. Aquinas lived centuries before the Reformation, however, and although Protestants disagree with some of his teachings, he did preserve a framework of Augustinian grace. Aristotelian philosophy was very influential in Aquinas' formulations and thinking. Human beings cannot merit eternal life, which would be a final cause that goes far beyond what humans can earn. As finite beings, humans cannot naturally grasp the infinite God: only through condescending grace can we know him. In the same way that a bucket of water won't boil without being subjected to high temperatures, human beings can't reach up to the beatific vision, grasping the infinite on their own. God in grace must move us beyond the natural sphere to the supernatural. Aquinas therefore taught that Adam needed grace even before the fall to keep his faculties ordered and to realize God's supernatural ends for him. Grace was needed far more after the fall into sin. Although some people do use the language of grace to refer to God's relationship with unfallen Adam, the Bible speaks of grace not in terms of finite/infinite relations, but in terms of a Holy God relating to sinners. Today, many Protestants think that the entire medieval church was semi-Pelagian, but that is a misunderstanding. Aquinas argued that God directs things toward their proper ends, and since eternal life is far beyond a human creature's nature, we can only move towards it when God predestines to take us past our natural capacities and to himself forever. God chooses to bring some into eternal life, and he bypasses others. Aquinas' view of God's grace in predestination is very Augustinian. In true scholastic fashion, Aquinas parses grace in many different ways, showing how essential it is for human beings. Because of the sovereign operation of God's grace, we are also enabled to cooperate with his grace in sanctification.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Justification by Grace: Martin Luther**

The Augustinian understanding of grace that was articulated by the Reformers was not a new invention in the history of the church. In *Bondage of the Will*, Luther argued for the clarity of the Scripture and for the inability of the fallen human will to choose what is right. His views on salvation and the human will were shaped by his understanding of God's sovereign grace. Luther was shaped by medieval philosophical and theological debates, and he reacted against some medieval teachings in his writings. Gabriel Biel had been an influential thinker, and his construct was that God entered into a pact with human beings, supplying them with grace as they did their best, but leaving them free to decide to cooperate and work with his grace or not. For Luther, a major problem was that "doing one's best" was ambiguous, and it would be impossible to know if anyone had done enough before God. Beyond this, he came to realize that this view was unbiblical. We are dead in our trespasses and sins—we don't receive grace by doing our best, but by acknowledging our inability, sin, and deadness. This realization itself can only come from a prior act of grace, an insight that leads to the doctrine of predestination. Depraved sinners act out of sin and selfishness, unable to move towards God apart from God's unilateral act of grace. God's love and election precede human love of God and a proper response to him. The law reveals our sin and inability to please God, while the cross reveals the nature of grace. Furthermore, it is only by God's grace that we can properly understand the cross. Justification is not by works, nor by a mixture of works and grace, but by God's grace alone, appropriated by faith alone. Faith itself is a gift from God, given by his grace. Luther was convinced that monergistic salvation apart from human works was necessary for assurance of salvation. In regards to why God saves some but not all, Luther believed that God operated with a hidden, secret will of decree, which was not identical with God's revealed will in Scripture.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Grace Reformed: John Calvin and the Reformed Tradition**

Discussions of grace and predestination moved away from Lutheranism to the Reformed camp, where John Calvin and others formulated the doctrines. Calvin excelled at clarifying the doctrine—he was not an inventor or novel. He held to the view that human beings were totally depraved through original sin, that they were unable to move towards God, and that salvation required a unilateral decision and act of God's sovereign grace. Predestination guarantees that grace is truly grace. Christ is the mirror of God's election: we are elected in Christ and Christ is elected by God. God's grace and mercy towards us is rooted in the work of the incarnate Christ. God's love and grace are not abstractions, they are embodied in Christ. Calvin insisted that these doctrines should be preached, since it was the truth of God and it was the work of the Holy Spirit to open hearts. If faith was the product of the human heart, then not everything in salvation was from God. An entailment of this position is that God decrees election and reprobation, but once again Calvin is not an innovator at this point. The Reformers viewed predestination not as an abstract doctrine to speculate about, but as a ground for assurance of salvation. One was not to try to figure out if they were part of God's secret, elective decree; on the contrary, one was to think about Christ and trust him, thus gaining assurance of salvation and election. It is only election in Christ that is to be considered, and focusing on Christ gives full assurance for those who trust him and delight in his love. The Father reveals his eternal election by whether or not

someone trusts in Christ. After the time of Calvin, debates about predestination grew in sophistication and nuance. Theological divisions occurred between supralapsarians and infralapsarians. Arminius reacted against supralapsarianism and provided a new formulation of the relationship between the human will and God's grace, where God provides resistible grace to all, and the individual decides whether or not to cooperate with it. In Arminius' view, God used his knowledge of all possible worlds to create one, knowing who would cooperate with his grace and who would not. The Reformers were convinced that justification could not be exclusively by grace through faith alone unless God's sovereign predestination was true.

## **Chapter 7**

### **The Church**

Grace is not a peripheral matter, nor can Christians contemplate it dispassionately. It is a central and gripping reality. God uses means to meet us with grace. The existence of the church and her organization into an institution is because of God's grace. It is God who designs and creates the church, bringing people into his holy assembly. God's children are created to be part of the church. God's grace flows through their connection with the church. We are saved as individuals, but God's plan of salvation is corporate—he is saving and building his church. In the same way that God unilaterally created the world, he creates the church as a new creation. The church is united with Christ and exists through the power of his resurrected life. God gave the temple in his grace, and he gives the new temple (i.e. the church) in his grace as well. God is the builder, not human hands. The church only exists because of the sovereign grace of God: he builds it, he creates it—its existence is not owing to our response. The church is also imaged as the bride of Christ, existing in special relationship with him now, but awaiting the consummation in the future. Christ is the head of the church, giving it direction, order and nourishment. The church's goals, priorities, and methods are determined by Christ—this is also a gift of grace. Today Christians talk about “doing church,” but it is really God who “does church” (if we can use such language). He establishes it, creates it, governs it, and directs it. The church must follow God's agenda. We act in response to God's grace. God has ordained that elders exercise authority in the church, in submission to his Word.

## **Chapter 8**

### **The Word**

The Word of God is the primary means by which we are confronted by the grace of God. God speaks to his people through his Word, and through its faithful proclamation in preaching. The power in preaching rests in God's grace, not the preacher's eloquence, and God has ordained that his grace be mediated through the message of his Word. God's speech is analogous to human speech—his creative activity is described in terms of speaking. He continues to work through speech. Faith clings to the Word. God's speech creates reality; word comes before existence. When Satan tempts Eve, he places his speech over and against the Lord's. Words define and interpret our perception of reality. God spoke to his people, creating, revealing, instructing, and much more. God acts through speech—his words accomplish his purposes. Christ's life is marked by God's speech and by authoritative teaching. These insights fueled the Reformers to make preaching the center of their ministries. Preaching was not merely human speaking, it was a prophetic ministry from God. Human beings cannot take credit for the fruit of preaching, since

it is the Word of God that accomplishes God's intentions. True preaching must be faithful to the Bible and present Christ. Biblically faithful preaching exposes human sin and points to the remedy in Christ. The Spirit uses the proclamation of the Word to create new life: hearers are either hardened or softened when they sit under preaching (there is no neutral response). The Holy Spirit must not be detached from the Word, as some radical Reformers and charismatics supposed. God's Spirit uses the Word. Since the Spirit works through the Word, preaching is not merely the communication of information, it is a means by which the Spirit imparts grace. Since Christ is the embodiment of grace, the message must set forth Christ, urging his claims upon the hearers.

## **Chapter 9**

### **The Sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper**

Evangelicals do not tend to place the same amount of significance on the sacraments as the Reformers did. All of the magisterial Reformers supported infant baptism, and they did so with verve. To reject infant baptism was seen as theologically, politically, and socially revolutionary. Baptism is very important in the NT, and it is a means of grace. God is the one who acts in baptism to dispense grace in connection with the word of Christ. Luther looked to his baptism for assurance, since it was the objective work of Christ that was applied to him in the waters of baptism. Baptism is the work of God, and the helplessness of infants who receive it demonstrates that it is all by God's grace. Luther saw baptism as signifying death, burial, and resurrection, a message which is significant throughout all of our life. Christ is offered to the infant in baptism—God's grace is prior to any human response. Zwingli flirted with credobaptism at one point, but in the end rejected it with great vigor. Calvin also held to infant baptism and connected the meaning of the sacraments with the Word of God, without which they were ineffective. Calvin argued that baptism is about the work of God in uniting us with Christ and Christ's benefits. Baptism is not a work that we do, but a sealing of the work God does in Christ. Although there are many points of debate, both paedobaptists and credobaptists should agree that baptism is the work of God rather than our work. The significant issue for all sides is whether baptism is a means of grace or not.

As much as there was agreement amongst the Reformers about infant baptism, there was a great divide between Lutherans and the Reformed in regards to the Lord's Supper. Luther held that the Supper offered Christ's flesh, since God's grace was given through Christ. He believed the preaching of the promise of the gospel was necessary for the grace of the sacrament to be understood. Zwingli believed that the Lord's Supper was a memorial of Christ's sacrifice which was to be received by faith; he took the words "this is my body" symbolically. Luther felt this was a travesty, since it made the sacrament dependent on the response of the person partaking of it, rather than being an objective offer of grace. Luther believed that divine attributes were communicated to Christ's humanity, so that his body was ubiquitous. Calvin believed that Luther's view at this point was in error, but he also thought that Zwingli's memorial view was insufficient. Calvin thought that the believer spiritually fed on Christ at the table. The Calvinistic view sees the Lord's Supper as a genuine means of grace. The Lord's Supper offers the same Christ as the preached word offers, albeit in a different form. It is more than a memorial, it is fellowship with Christ.

## **Chapter 10**

### **Prayer**

Prayer is a response to God's grace, but it is also a means of God's grace. Through prayer we are built up and strengthened in our relationship with God. Luther and other Reformers reacted vigorously against the phenomenon of praying to the saints. Christ alone was seen to be our intercessor and mediator. Since God's grace is communicated to us in Christ, Christ's ongoing intercession for us is the conduit through which God's grace flows. Christ is fully God and fully man, and he is a man of continuous, intercessory prayer. As fully human, Christ sympathizes with us and understands us. Prayer is a means of grace because Christ's gracious intercession is at the heart of prayer. There is agreement amongst the three persons of the Trinity when it comes to Christ's prayers. This gives us great confidence as we pray. It is the Holy Spirit who works in us to help us to pray, leading us by grace. During his earthly life, Christ was a man of prayer, and he taught his disciples to pray. Prayer is necessary and significant in the Christian life. Prayer is a means of grace because God has ordained that he will accomplish his gracious purposes through its instrumentality. God predestines ends, and he also predestines means to those ends—prayer is an important means in the plan of God. God's sovereignty is a great motivator to prayer. Public prayer when the body of Christ is gathered is a very important—and much neglected—spiritual discipline. God's people as a whole should pray to him, and be led in prayer together. The Book of Psalms shows the wide range of human emotions and requests that can be poured out to God. Public prayer needs to be heartfelt, but today many people have confused spontaneity with authentic, heartfelt spirituality.

### **Conclusion**

Grace-alone churches will take sin seriously, recognizing that God's grace is his divine response to our wickedness. As a result, such a church will take Christ seriously, not presenting grace-as-an-abstract-concept, but rather presenting Christ as the embodiment of God's grace. This allows us to accept God's priority in salvation, and to rest in his predestinating will, thus having a foundation for assurance. God's grace is what makes the gathering together with other believers in the church so vital, and those who take God's grace seriously will have the Bible at the heart of their corporate gatherings. This entails that preaching will be taken seriously as a means of grace and as a word from the Lord. Grace-alone churches take baptism seriously, since it is a sign of God's grace in Christ. The Lord's Supper will also be taken seriously, since it gives us grace in Christ. Prayer will be a vital part of a grace-alone church, since it is a God-ordained means to accomplish his gracious purposes. Only by the grace of God will we be able to live this way, to the praise of his glory.

**Note:** This interview first appeared on [Books At a Glance](#) and is used with permission.