

# By Grace: God's People

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Martin Luther, wrote the words they are fixed on the minds and hearts of millions; we include them as part of our confession. The words describe grace:

“I believe that God has made me with all creatures.”

“I believe that Jesus Christ...has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil.”

“I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him. But the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.”

Not the action of man but the action of God stands at the center of our confession: we are God's people by grace. My creation, my very existence in this world—it is not my doing. My redemption—all was finished by Christ on the cross at Calvary—all by grace. My sanctification, my coming to faith—this too is the work of God. By grace we are His people!

Luther focuses on the individual in his explanation of the Apostles' Creed. For the Creed is the confession of an individual: I believe, into this faith I was baptized. But I am never the only one who believes. I am one of many. In his explanation to the Third Article Luther moves step by step from the individual to the church, using the same words in each case. Just as the Holy Ghost calls, enlightens, sanctifies, and keeps the individual in the faith, so He also “calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.” Only one word has been added to the list of accomplishments of the Spirit: He gathers the church. By grace we are not only God's person but God's people – *By Grace: God's People.*

The Holy Scriptures are God's record of grace, His plan of salvation. We hear the Lord saying to Abraham:

“Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father's house, To the land which I will show you; And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12,1-4).

There is most certainly a challenge in these words: go forth! And sometimes we are inclined to emphasize the challenge, and the response of Abraham. But what is really wonderful about these words is the amazing grace. Notice all the unconditional promises which the Lord makes to Abraham. Up to this point in Genesis we have heard only that Abram was the son of Terah. We have heard nothing more—no recital of good works, no description of a spotless moral life. To this person—out of the clear blue sky we would say—God makes some unconditional commitments:

“I will make you a great nation, I will bless you and make your name great, and so you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you, I will curse. In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Only the one word “grace” will adequately describe the action of the Lord in choosing Abraham. By grace he became God’s person. And when we review the life of Abraham, we see how often that grace of God is acting. Abraham was a great person of faith. At the same time there are on his record incidents which show how little he really trusted God’s loving care. But nothing in the dealings of the Lord with Abraham calls grace into question. Even when he is less than honest with the Pharaoh in Egypt, it is not Abraham who suffers any affliction but “The Lord struck Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram’s wife” (Gen 12,17). Abimelech, king of Gerar, was also deceived when Abraham said of Sarah: “She is my sister.” Abimelech took Sarah to be his wife. The Lord warned Abimelech in a dream not to touch her but to restore her to Abraham. The Lord continues: “For he is a prophet, and he will pray for you, and you will live” (Gen 20,7). What a veil of love the Lord casts over Abraham! The deceived goes to the deceiver and asks for his prayers.

In the plan of salvation the Lord had called Abraham. Nothing dare happen to this man. For the ultimate promise made to Abraham must be fulfilled: “In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” St. Matthew’s Gospel helps to bring out the fulfillment of this promise by tracing the genealogy of Jesus Christ back to Abraham (not back to Adam as Luke does). Matthew writes: “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” By grace Abraham was one of God’s people so that in him blessing might come to all the families of the earth.

God’s plan of salvation included the use of a murderer: “So he looked this way and that, and when he saw there was no one around, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand” (Ex 2,12). This is the same person who later “went up to the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. And the glory of the Lord rested on Mount Sinai...and Moses entered the midst of the cloud as he went up to the mountain; and Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights” (Ex 24,15.16a.18).

We are used to thinking of Moses as the great lawgiver. His role as lawgiver is also brought out in John 1,17: “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.” Moses was indeed the great lawgiver. But the lawgiver was not saved by the law but by grace. The very fact that Moses survived infancy is a special act of grace. Few lads escaped watery death in the Nile in those days of oppression. But Moses was raised in the household of Pharaoh, God’s way of training him for the work which would be his. And what better training for a trip through the wilderness than forty years of shepherding amidst the craggy hills and blistering hot sands of the Sinai desert. That was the preparation which the Lord gave to Moses to lead the people out of Egypt. When the Lord finally called him to that task, the Lord knew better than Moses how well he was prepared. And yet no matter how well prepared, it was grace which released Israel from the furnace of bondage, grace which parted the Red Sea, and ultimately grace which gave to Israel the law.

It is a part of our heritage as members of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod to be blessed with teachers who brought out in striking fashion how grace rules every action of the Lord. August Pieper, long time professor at our seminary, wrote an article about the title given God in the Exodus story: “The Glory of the Lord.” In this article Prof. Pieper speaks about grace:

The eternal unchangeable God is the God of grace. And that not just since Abraham, but from everlasting to everlasting. He never was anything else and is not now and never will be. He was the God of grace before all time and is this during all time and will be this at the end of all time and after all time. We human beings through our defection have turned

His grace into wrath for ourselves, without this grace in itself becoming anything else. There would be no wrath and no punishment in God's great creation if previously there had been no love, goodness and grace of God. At first God approaches every person exclusively in goodness and grace, also the sinner in spite of his sin. Even his commandments for sinful men are in themselves, like the commandment or prohibition in Paradise, pure goodness and grace, power and Spirit" (WLQ, Oct 1955, p, 255).

Also the great lawgiver Moses was one of God's people by grace. Anyone who uses Moses in such a way as to teach salvation by works or the keeping of the law is not understanding the place of Moses in God's plan of salvation. God used this runaway murderer to bring Israel out of Egypt and plant His people in the promised land God called this nation to be a king or priests and a holy nation (Ex 1.9,6). Of these people the Lord said, "Israel is My son, My firstborn" (Ex 4,22).

Israel proved to be a son disloyal to a gracious father. The Old Testament prophet who brings out most clearly the shocking disloyalty of Israel and the steadfast love of the Lord is Hosea. Whereas Moses was the first great prophet of Israel, Hosea is the last great prophet of the most populous portion of Israel, the northern Kingdom. It was his job to announce judgment. The mighty power of Assyria was moving to strike down a condemned nation. King and prince care only for pleasure and plotting. There is no fear of the Lord.

On the day of our king the princes became sick with the heat of wine; He stretched out his hand with scoffers, For their hearts are like an oven As they approach their plotting; Their, anger smolders all night, In the morning it burns like a flaming fire. All of them are hot like an oven, And they consume their rulers; All their kings have fallen. None. of them calls on Me (Hosea 7,5-7).

The malady of Israel is summed up in this very famous word of the Lord: "For I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice, and in knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings" (6,6). The word "loyalty" is a translation of the Hebrew word "*chesed*". This is a key word in the entire Old Testament. This word refers to the faithfulness or loyal love that binds two parties together in covenant relationship. The Lord abounds in "*chesed*", in steadfast love to Israel (Ex 34,6). But as for Israel: "your loyalty is like a morning cloud, and like the dew which goes away early" (6,4). Israel was not loyal to the Lord; Israel did not know the Lord; Israel came under the indictment of the Lord.

Listen to the word of the Lord, O sons of Israel, For the Lord has a case against the inhabitants of the land, Because there is no faithfulness or kindness (*chesed*) Or knowledge of God in the land. There is swearing, deception, murder, stealing, and adultery. They employ violence, so that bloodshed follows bloodshed. Therefore the land mourns, And every one who lives in it languishes Along with the beasts of the field and the birds of the sky; And also the fish of the sea disappear (4,1-3).

In despair the Lord cries out: "What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah" (6,4)? The tragedy of Israel is recited in Hosea 11:

When Israel was a youth I loved him, And out of Egypt I called My son. The more they called them, (Greek LXX: “I called them, The more they went from them; they went from me;”) They kept sacrificing to the Baals And burning incense to idols. Yet it is I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them in My arms; But they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of a man, with bonds of love, And I became to them as one who lifts the yoke from their jaws; And I bent down and fed them. They will not return to the land of Egypt; But Assyria—he will be their king, Because they refused to return to Me. And the sword will whirl against their cities, And will demolish their gate bars And consume them because of their counsels. So My people are bent on turning from Me. Though they call them to the One on high, None at all exalts Him.

The doom of Israel is fixed; it’s all over; there is no future for this wayward nation; Assyria will put an end to God’s chosen people; the Lord has had enough.

But wait! The Lord is not through. He has more to say. We hear again His anguish of heart. He cannot give up His plan of salvation.

How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I surrender you, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboim? My heart is turned over within Me, All my compassions are kindled. I will not execute My fierce anger; I will not destroy Ephraim again. For I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst, And I will not come in wrath. They will walk after the Lord, He will roar like a lion; Indeed He will roar. And His sons will come trembling from the west, They will come trembling like birds from Egypt, And like doves from the land of Assyria; And I will settle them in their houses, declares the Lord” (11,8-11).

The roar of the Lord, on the one hand a sign of destructive fury for the nation of Israel, here sounds forth as a signal of hope for returning exiles once more the Lord of grace gathers His people, There is a future for the new people of God.

One of the most striking examples of grace in action is the dealing of Hosea with his adulterous wife Gomer. Gomer was an adulteress; she did not deserve a husband’s love, Yet the Lord commands Hosea to love her. Gomer stands for adulterous Israel—and ultimately for all the sinful people of the world. She does not deserve love. Yet the Lord loves His sinful people and is loyal to them. This is pure grace.

Israel as a nation did come to an end, But from the remnants of the people whom the Lord called from exile in Egypt, a new nation was to come forth, a nation which included people of all families of the earth, Of this nation the Lord says through that same prophet of judgment, Hosea:

“I will have compassion on her who had not obtained compassion, And I will say to those who were not My people., ‘You are my people!’ And they will say, ‘Thou art my God!’” (21;23).

It is the apostle Peter who takes up this theme of the new Israel in his first epistle. Gathering together a number of Old Testament terms, he addresses his readers “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, that you may

proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Peter 2,9f).

To whom was Peter writing? In the greeting of the letter he names as the recipients “those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.” These places are all in modern day Turkey, quite a distance removed from the boundaries of the Old Testament promised land but geography and nationality are not what count when we consider the holy nation Peter is describing. Rather these are people “chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father by the sanctifying work of the Spirit” (1, 1f); these are people “not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ” (1,18f); these “are believers in God, who raised Him (Christ) from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God” (1,21). The Lord has not forsaken His people; by grace He has called into being a new nation, sons of God by faith in Jesus Christ.

Israel had failed; the only begotten Son of the Father, Jesus Christ, did not fail. As Israel was called out of Egypt, so also Jesus Christ was called out of Egypt (Matthew 2,15). As Israel was tested in the wilderness, so the Son of God was tested in the wilderness. But where Israel stumbled and fell, Jesus Christ fulfilled His task. By His, perfect obedience and sacrificial offering for sin He atoned for the sins of the world. He rose again from the dead victorious over sin, death, and Satan’s power. Here was God’s new beginning, one which will come to completion when the Son returns in glory.

Peter was an eyewitness of these events, in his own life and in the lives of others he experienced God’s grace in action. Peter was by trade a fisherman seeking to eke out a living on the shores of the Sea of Galilee when Christ came his way. The call came: “Follow me.” Peter was not called because of any merit or worthiness on his part. He was called because Christ wanted him. Peter followed. He followed Christ even to the courtyard of the high priest where his loyalty to Christ was tested. Peter failed as Israel had so often failed. Peter repented and was restored with a look. Peter figured in God’s plan of salvation. He was a preacher of conviction on Pentecost day calling upon people from all nations to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. The Holy Spirit used Peter in the task of gathering the new Israel. Peter knew what grace was. He became an apostle of grace gathering a new nation of priests.

The Lord had plans for another man, a man in many ways quite unlike Peter. Peter was a native of Palestine, a common man of the people. Paul was a native of Tarsus, a city alive with Greek culture and education. Paul was a student of the Scriptures, trained as a Pharisee, He did not know the life of a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee; he was much more familiar with the ships that sailed on the Great Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, the international ships of trade and travel. Paul had the best of teachers in the holy city of Jerusalem; he was fully prepared to devote his life to furthering the cause of Judaism. This meant stamping out the new sect devoted to proclaiming that Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of the Old Testament promise of the Messiah.

Paul set out with vigor to uproot the church. But he had hardly made a good start when he was arrested by the very Person he pursued. On the Damascus Road Paul heard from his new Master: “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting; but rise and enter the city, and it shall be told you what you must do” (Acts 9,5f) . The disciple Ananias did not believe his ears when the Lord spoke to him of this new convert: “He is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel” (Acts 9,15).

And for the rest of his life Paul found it difficult to believe that the Lord had chosen him to be not only a disciple of Christ but an apostle to the nations. One word keeps popping up in the vocabulary of Paul, The word is “grace.” In listing the appearances of the risen Lord Jesus Paul reports: “Last of all, as it were to one untimely born, He appeared to me, also For I am the least of the apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church, of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me” (1 Cor 15,5-10).

God’s plan called for Paul, the earnest student of the Jewish traditions, to be the pioneer missionary to the Gentiles. “I was made a minister, according to the gift of God’s grace which was given to me according to the working of His power. To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ” (Eph 3,7f). In words written near the end of his life, Paul displays the rich treasury of grace: “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that being justified by His grace we might be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” (Tit 3,5-7).

St. Paul died 1900 years ago. Those who came after him did not always so faithfully cling to the truth that there is one reason and one reason alone why a people of God exists in the world today: that one reason is grace. The temptation is always for man to take the credit in some way: my works, my feelings, my good intentions. Or if nothing else some would like to make themselves not quite so bad as some others saying, “You see, at least I did not resist when God approached me.” The doctrine of grace goes against all or man’s thinking and way of doing things; yet it alone gives true security, peace, hurt, and joy.

In the centuries since Paul two men stand out as sturdy defenders of the Biblical doctrine of grace. The first is the bishop of Hippo, a city on the north shore of the continent of Africa. His name was Augustine, perhaps the most influential theologian of western Christianity.

Augustine early in life showed great intellectual ability. He loved the company of people who asked hard questions and debated the best answers. He was not Christian during these years though his mother Monica did not cease to pray for his conversion. Rather, he joined the company of the Manichaeans who propounded a philosophy of dualism: the world is the product of a battle between two great eternal conflicting forces, light and darkness, good and evil. Augustine soon grew tired of his association with the Manichaeans and began to study Neo-Platonism. This philosophy looked upon all that we see and feel (matter) as evil and almost non-existent. Salvation is gained by release of the soul from the body. Augustine was now 30 years old and becoming more of an agnostic all the time.

But the Lord had not forgotten him. At this point in life Augustine came under the influence of the bishop of Milan, Italy, St. Ambrose. The preaching of Ambrose led Augustine to take more seriously the teachings of the Christian Church. He soon became a catechumen and was baptized. Returning to his native land he took up residence in Hippo where he ultimately became the bishop of the church. Now his days were filled with preaching, teaching, writing letters, and administering the affairs of the congregation. The Lord in his grace had prepared Augustine for a most important task: the defense of the Biblical doctrine of grace.

Controversy arose when a man named Pelagius set out to resist the slackening of Christian moral standards, He felt that conditions could be improved if the church would emphasize more strongly each individual’s responsibility for doing good or evil. He did not like

it that some used the doctrine of original sin as an excuse for their failings; and the practice of baptizing infants also contributed to un-Christian living according to Pelagius.

In response Augustine defended the doctrine of original sin and the practice of infant baptism. He saw clearly that the abuse of some reaching is not a reason for giving it up. In his writings Augustine emphasized repeatedly that man is saved by grace alone and not because he makes use of free will to do that which is good, and so merit salvation. From his own life Augustine certainly had experienced the working of God's grace. And his great contribution to the theology of the Christian Church is his emphasis that the believers are the people of God by grace alone.

Along with Augustine we must list Martin Luther as a great defender of grace. Luther knew very well, what it was to live under a system of religion which stressed human merit. Not God's grace but man's works were the center of attention. Luther tried his best to find peace of conscience by his own religious efforts. But all was in vain until his eyes were opened by the Spirit. Along with a careful study of the Scriptures, it was Luther's reading of the writings of Augustine which led him to the realization that reform was needed in the church.

Those who remember Martin Luther usually think first of two dramatic acts: the 95 theses against indulgences which Luther nailed to the church door at Wittenberg in October 1517 and his heroic defiance of the authority of pope and emperor at the Diet of Worms in April 1521. These two actions do capture the imagination of people and are easily dramatized. But of much greater importance in the life of the church is the constant emphasis in his sermons, writings, hymns, and catechisms on the Biblical doctrine of grace.

This emphasis on the grace of God was sounded several years before Worms, at Heidelberg in May 1518, seven months after the 95 theses, at a meeting of the general chapter of the Augustinian monks of Germany, Luther proposed a set of theological theses for debate. This was done to acquaint the Augustinian brothers with the new evangelical theology. In all there were 28 statements. Among these are the following:

“16. The person who believes that he can obtain grace by doing what is in him adds sin to sin so that he becomes doubly guilty.

“18. It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ:

“23. The law brings the wrath of God, kills, reviles, accuses, judges, and condemns everything that is not in Christ.

“25. He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ,

“26. The law says, ‘do this’, and it is never done. Grace says, ‘believe in this’, and everything is already done” (LW 31,40)

One sees from this how Luther had a firm hold on the doctrine of grace at the very beginning of his public career as reformer of the church.. In His own way and at His own time the Lord once more had prepared a champion of grace to bring to people the good news that in Christ all has been accomplished for our salvation. By grace we are His people!

One could go on to speak about other great leaders and teachers of the church who loyally proclaimed God's plan of salvation. Among these we would include the first president of our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, John Muehlhaeuser. Muehlhaeuser was not a theologian of the calibre of Augustine or Luther. But Muehlhaeuser was a preacher of God's free

grace. His great desire was to proclaim the message of grace to as many people as possible. John Muehlhaeuser was a missionary of grace.

As we members of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod celebrate 125 years of God's grace, we need to appreciate what God has done for us both as a church body and as individuals. Much has been said—and will be said also at this convention—of God's grace to us as a Synod. Grace is also for each of us a very personal matter. It is good to reflect on the way in which God has guided us along the way to the point where we are today. Think of parents, pastors, teachers, and friends along the way whom God has used: If each of us would stand and recite the many ways in which the Lord has been gracious to us personally, we would be here for some time. For our creation, for our redemption, for our sanctification, for our preservation—for all of this we people must give thanks to our God. To Him be the glory!

Along with personal appreciation goes the readiness to defend the truth of this Biblical doctrine of grace. We cannot simply take the preservation of this teaching for granted. Too often in the history of the church, grace has been slighted or forgotten. We must contend for the truth that by grace alone we are God's people. There is the danger that one puts such an emphasis upon the faith of the individual that faith in itself becomes a work, a condition for grace. The demand is made to accept and to experience Christ. Again and again people are told by some preachers: you must believe; you must invite Jesus into your hearts. Man's believing, man's faith, man's repentance, man's acceptance becomes so much the center of things that God's grace is forgotten.

No doubt the root of the problem in this type of preaching is the contention that repentance and faith are something which man is able to produce in and of himself. It is clearly taught that Christ's work on the cross was free grace. No other sacrifice is needed. But the problem is with the third article. We must maintain that repentance and faith are also gifts of grace, a gift of the Spirit working through the Gospel. Faith is a creation of the Holy Spirit just as much as my physical life is a creation of my heavenly Father.

Recently a book was published by Tyndale House Publishers of Wheaton, Illinois, by a team of British authors, which examines the Bible passages relating to the doctrine of election. It is titled *God's Strategy in Human History* and was a *Christianity Today* Book-of-the-Month selection. The Augustinian theology of grace comes under heavy attack as the authors argue strongly for free will and man's ability to make his own choices in spiritual matters. The authors maintain that God gave man a free will to obey or to disobey God's commands to trust Him, to accept or reject grace: Grace is conditioned by faith. "Grace is given to those who seek it in God's way of faith" (p. 125). Grace is here not an attitude or action of God but rather a quality which He gives or infuses into the person who has come to faith. The authors refuse to accept any statement of Christian doctrine which is contradictory to human reason. For example, consider these two statements: (a.) Man can and does reject God's will and plan for him; (b) God determines all events and His will is always done. The authors' comment: "This is plain contradiction, and if we are to allow such contradictions in our thinking then almost any doctrine can be read into the Bible on the basis of isolated verses—being heralded as a new 'side to the truth'" (p. 40). Luther is attacked because of his adoption of the views of Augustine, it does not surprise us that infant baptism and original sin also come under heavy bombardment.

For these authors the ultimate cause for a person's salvation is the act of repentance. Several quotations will bring this out:



What God demands of man is not that he should earn salvation by good works; it is not even primarily that he should have faith; what God demands of man is *repentance*. (Acts 17,30) . When we tell a man to ‘Repent and believe ....’ then the priorities are right. If a man is prepared to repent, God will help him to believe. Even then, faith cannot be said to cause a man’s regeneration. God gives the gift of regeneration and rebirth to those who repent” (p. 148).

Near the end. of the book this same emphasis on repentance is repeated: “The Bible tells us to repent and believe. If we repent, God will help us to see and believe in his Son” (p. 239). To sum up: a person has the free will to either repent or to reject God’s invitation. If a person chooses to repent, then God will create faith in his heart so that he believes in Christ. This is election in view of repentance. In the words of the authors: “He foreknew all about those who would repent in response to his Holy Spirit and would put their hope for the future in Christ” (p. 101).

In the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a bitter controversy raged within the Synodical Conference regarding the doctrine of election. You will be hearing more about this in the essay tomorrow. One of the champions of the Biblical doctrine of grace was C. F. W. Walther, president of Missouri Synod. It is instructive to listen to what Dr. Walther had to say regarding the commands of Scripture to “repent” and “turn again.” In a lecture titled “In its Teaching of Election, too, the Evangelical Lutheran Church gives God Alone the Glory,” Dr. Walther says,

When God demands something of us, it does not follow at all that we can comply with the demands. On the contrary, God addresses us in this way in order to show us what we are: ‘Behold, you poor fellow, you can do nothing, not even a little, of that which I command you to do.’ However, when God exhorts us to accept his grace, he at the same time brings about acceptance on our part. When he requires repentance of us, he gives it to us. When he demands that we turn again, he enables us to turn. When he calls to us, ‘Work! Strive!’, he supplies us with the working and the stAl-ing” (*Lutheran Confessional Theology in America 1840-1880*, p. 177).

Later Walther speaks of the relationship of grace and faith,

To be saved through faith means nothing other than to be saved by grace. Anybody who says that he is saved because of his faith is mistaken or does not know what he is talking about. Under no circumstances is one to understand this to mean that God decided that those who are so pious as to believe everything he has said in the Bible are on this account to go to heaven .... If this were so, then faith would be nothing but a. work; and it would be curious that precisely this one should count for so much in God’s sight., count for more than all other works” (*ibid*, p. 190). One final sentence: “Accordingly a man’s faith is not a cause of God’s love but a consequence of it, anal it is not a cause of election but a consequence of it” (p. 169).

Our task in the world is to proclaim objective justification, that God has in Christ reconciled, redeemed, and ,justified the whole world. This is an accomplished fact of grace. We are to call upon people to repent and believe the Gospel. But at the same time we must realize

and confess that only the Holy Spirit can bring about repentance. and create faith in the hearts of people. Faith also is a gift of grace. It is altogether by grace that we are God's people.

The doctrine of grace is also threatened by mushrooming signs of doubt concerning the practice of infant baptism. We know of course that those with an Anabaptist theology will not baptize infants. But now also in Churches where infants are baptized, questions are being raised about this practice. The recently published *Common Catechism*, a book produced by an international team of 40 Protestant and Roman Catholic theologians, states:

Because of this uncertain information in the New Testament, and the deeper insight gained into the relationship between faith and the sacraments, and last not least because we are no longer constrained by any extreme interpretation of 'original sin'—the baptism of infants and children has been a much disputed topic in the churches." Then follows a series of statements, the first of which is: "Their is no compulsory reason for Christian parents to have their children baptzed as infants, particularly when the parents themselves are no longer close to the Church or the Christian faith" (p. 377).

As in the case of Pelagius, many are disturbed by the fact that baptized people don't always show by their lives that they are children of God. The feeling is that if a person would be baptized as an adult, then he would really act more like a Christian.

Most of us, however, know young people and adults who have been instructed in the Christian faith and been confirmed (comparable to believer's baptism) but then have not remained faithful to the Lord. It is interesting that Hal Lindsey, quite famous as an author of end-time books, was baptized three times as an adult before much changed in his life. So adult baptism is no guarantee that defections from the Christian faith will suddenly be a thing or the past:

The attacks on infant baptism may also spring from the increased emphasis on the baptism with the Spirit, the second baptism proclaimed by the Pentecostals. It is maintained that baptizing an infant with water is of no value. We of course know that the water by itself does not bestow the Spirit but rather it is the promise of God and faith which trusts such promise of God which is effective in baptism. Again it is not what man does but what God is doing that makes all the difference.

Both in the Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches new baptismal liturgies are being proposed which put increased emphasis on adult baptism. In a Roman Catholic worship publication it is stated that "adult initiation should be the practical norm" and that "infant baptism derives from the adult form." It is maintained that the rites of baptism, confirmation, and first communion should not be separated and that if children of Christian parents are baptized in infancy, they should also be confirmed and receive communion at the same time (*Worship*, Feb 1974, p. 71f).

The Inter—Lutheran Commission on Worship has recently published a baptismal rite for provisional use. In the introduction to this rite there are some very good statements about the importance of baptism and how we ought to make more of baptism in our preaching, teaching, and life. But there is also present the suggestion that adult baptism may become the more normal practice of the church. Describing the current situation it is said,

As the church becomes less of a cultural influence, an increasing number of adults are among the baptismal candidates. It can no longer be assumed that practically everyone is

baptized in infancy. As persons who have been associated with another denomination seek fellowship with Lutheran congregations, situations arise which suggest a more flexible baptismal liturgy. In recent decades Christians have gained a new appreciation for the communal nature of the church as people of God. As their sense of the covenantal nature of this community grows, they grow in sensitivity to the problem of indiscriminate Baptism of infants. They do not necessarily question infant baptism, but many favor a more responsible practice” (p. 9).

The service provided is very lengthy with increased emphasis on ritual, and ceremony. The promises made by the participants in the baptismal rite are given much more prominence. What man is doing, man’s promises and pledges, tend to overshadow what God has done, is doing, and will do in the future.

The late Dr. Kent Knutson, former president of the Americana Lutheran Church, would hardly be pleased with any effort to downgrade infant baptism. In an essay “Baptism and Christian Education”, Dr. Knutson writes:

Baptism I think is the foundational sacrament and the foundational act in the church, not because singly and by itself it should have so much attention paid to it, but because it is a microcosm of all that the gospel is. It is a mirror of grace ....It is a microcosm of the gospel because God acts on my behalf before and without my knowledge. God has done something for me quite outside my need for it or my desire for it or my understanding of it. God justifies the ungodly, God’s grace is for the unlovely. In infant baptism it is clear. God asks for this child without the child’s understanding, without its knowledge, without its wishes, without any decisions; therefore the gospel is illustrated. Pure grace is demonstrated more than any other place. I think infant baptism has tremendous value; I think it is a constant reminder to the church that this is what grace is. If we didn’t have infant baptism then we would have lost one of the great symbols of the gospel (*Rejoice With Us*, p. 76) .

Defending the practice of infant baptism is a way in which we are defending the truth that we are God’s people by grace.

My dear Christian friends, because we are God’s people by grace, we will be gracious people. We will be people whose lives are full of good works. In the lecture of Dr. Walther from which I quoted previously, there is a striking thesis on the relationship of grace and good works: “When, we have become quite sure in our hearts that God does not care at all about good works that earn heaven and that his glory consists only in his saving us by grace, it is precisely then that we burn with zeal for good works” (p. 171).

Someone has remarked: “The Lord said to Israel, ‘You are my chosen people’. He did not say, ‘you are my frozen people.’” People whom God has chosen will most certainly be alive and doing. We have received a gift which we neither expect nor deserve. It is a gift freely offered with no conditions attached. Such an unexpected and undeserved gift of grace will most certainly foster in us a large sense of indebtedness and gratitude. The man of grace lives gratefully.

There is a devotion in the book *Little Visits With God* which I’d like to share with you. It goes like this:

Once a rosebush and a snail lived together in the corner of a garden. The rosebush was happy all day long. It was thankful to God for the fresh air and the warm sun and the good rain, Every day it grew a little more, and soon it was covered with roses. The sweet and beautiful flowers praised God and made people happy.

The snail lived underneath the rosebush. It liked to stay in the shadows and do nothing. When anyone came near, it would crawl into its shell as if to say, “I’m not interested in anybody else.’

One day the snail looked up and said to the rosebush, ‘You are foolish for always giving people your roses.’ The rosebush smiled back and said, ‘How can I help giving the things which God gives to me?’

God’s children are always receiving His gifts of love free of charge. Every day they receive His forgiveness and His Spirit They also receive His loving care and their daily food. Why shouldn’t they gladly share God’s gifts with others, especially the sweet story of Jesus and what He has done for the whole world?

Jesus said, “Freely you have received, freely give.” Let us gladly give to other people what we receive freely from God. Then we will be more like a rosebush than a snail” (pp. 282f).

This is a big world in which the Lord has planted us. How big it is forms one of my earliest recollections of a sermon. It was mission festival and a powerful preacher was in the pulpit. He was talking about all the people in the world. I must have been sitting in the front row of the church because I remember so vividly how in his powerful voice this pastor revealed the length of time it would take for all the people in the world to walk pas the pulpit. I don’t remember how long but I do recall that it was an impressive number of days. Back in 1916 when the population of the world was 1.7 billion, the *National Geographic* reported that “if they were all set down at a banquet, it would require sixteen tables reaching around the globe to seat them” Today with a world population of 3.9 billion, more than a 100% increase since 1916, no one dares to talk about how many banquet tables it would take to feed the population of the world. We live as God’s people in this big world, God’s people by grace. He has chosen us to be lights in the world. “Let your light shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”

In His grace God has chosen to plant our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod within the context of 20<sup>th</sup> century America. America is a nation which has always prided itself in the freedom its people enjoy. We do indeed enjoy many freedoms, including also a large measure of freedom of choice when it comes to cars, clothes, vocations, and entertainment. The success on freedom may easily lead people to believe that we are also free spiritually by nature—free to make the decision for good or evil.. Americans affirm that we are masters of our own destiny, that whatever a person really wants, he gets. The American spirit has been characterized by boundless self-confidence. This translates smoothly into a theology which glorifies the workings of man and has little place for the grace of God.

Americans are used to the idea of electing their leader. They don’t take too well to the idea that when it comes to eternal salvation, we don’t do the electing but God does. There are

some who would just as soon elect the god they want to have and serve, a privilege which the Lord God does not grant us. We live in God's world; He does the electing.

But times are changing. The confidence of Americans has been shaken. We are finding limits to what we can do, limits to freedom, limits to food, limits to energy. Man is not so much the master of his own fate as for a time he imagined. The old optimism is beginning to fade. For such a time as this God sends us into the world with a Gospel proclaiming free grace: God is the Maker; God is the Redeemer; God is the Sanctifier. As His people by grace we are called to represent Him in our world and to communicate His message of grace to this world. Will we be a rosebush or a snail?

During this 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, we have been doing a lot of looking back. Soon the anniversary celebrations will be over; GRACE 125 will be history. Not a few persons may breathe a sigh of relief. Celebrations and anniversaries get a little old after a while. But we dare never forget what is most important about this celebration, the renewed appreciation for God's plan of salvation, a plan of pure grace. President Naumann said this well at the very beginning of the celebration: "If the celebration, is to be pleasing to God, the accent must fall upon what God has done for us, not what we have done for God." God has done great things for us; by grace He has made us His people "that I should be His own, and live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness; even as He is risen from death, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true."