

The Seminary's Unchanging Foundation in a Changing World: *Sola Gratia*

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In 1863 our Wisconsin Synod in convention resolved to establish a seminary to supply the pastors so desperately needed by its congregations. The European mission houses and societies were not sending enough candidates to satisfy all the requests for pastors the young synod was receiving. Nor were the Lutheran synods and seminaries in the eastern part of the United States a dependable source. Individual pastors and conferences could not train enough young men to fill the empty pulpits of the synod, although some attempts were made. It had become increasingly clear that the only solution to the manpower problem was for our synod to establish a school to train its own pastors.¹

Although the need for more pastors was the prime reason for the founding of the seminary, there was also a confessional reason. Our forefathers were moving away from the unionism that characterized the mission houses which had sent most of them to this country. They wanted to be orthodox Lutherans. And they wanted the next generation of pastors to be trained as Lutherans, thoroughly instructed in the Holy Scriptures and the Lutherans Confessions. Under the leadership of Synod President John Bading and Professor Adolf Hoenecke confessionalism grew. Our seminary played an increasingly important role, for the theology of a church body ultimately depends on the theology of its seminary and the pastors which that seminary produces.²

From the start the seminary was meant to be a Lutheran seminary. It was built on the Reformation principles of *sola gratia, sola scriptura* and *sola fide*. These Reformation principles separate confessional Lutherans not only from the myriad of religions in this world, but from every other denomination of Christianity as well.

That is especially true of *sola gratia*, by grace alone. Our seminary's continuing purpose is to train parish pastors to take that gospel message of salvation by grace alone to a world which so desperately needs to hear it. A correct understanding of *sola gratia* is vital for every aspect of a pastor's work. It is no accident then that our seminary's curriculum contains required exegetical courses in Genesis, Psalms, Isaiah, Galatians, Ephesians and Romans, for in these books God's grace to fallen mankind shines through most brightly. It is no accident that every student takes a course in the Formula of Concord and the Augsburg Confession and Apology. These confessions clearly proclaim salvation by God's grace alone and rule out every idea of man's worthiness or ability to contribute to his salvation in any way.

God's grace to fallen mankind is the theme that runs through every course at our seminary, permeates every classroom and inspires every professor and student. It is the heart and soul of the institution, the foundation on which it is built. That will be the subject of this study:

The Seminary's Unchanging Foundation in a Changing World: *Sola Gratia*

To understand what is meant by saving grace we need to take a brief look at the terminology which the Scriptures employ. Grace in the Old Testament is usually expressed by the Hebrew noun חַן (verb—חָנַן). It

¹ Max Lehninger, et. al., *Continuing in His Word* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1951), pp 137–139. Cf. also: I. P. Frey, "Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 1863–1963," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* (WLQ) Vol. 60, No. 3, (July 1963), pp 175–178.

² Lehninger, op. cit., 19–21. Cf. also: Frey, op. cit., pp 172–175, and Carl Lawrenz, "Message Delivered at the Centennial Year Graduation Service, June 4, 1963," *WLQ*, Vol. 60, No. 3, (July 1963), p 165.

“depicts a heartfelt response by someone who has something to give to one who has a need.”³ The verb means to be gracious or to graciously provide someone with something.⁴ A person who is gracious shows favor or kindness to another.

The concept of grace is closely related to that expressed by the Hebrew noun **רַחֲמִים** (steadfast love). This is God’s love or mercy which endures forever (Psalm 136).⁵

The concept of grace is also closely related to the Hebrew verb **רָחַם** (to show love for or have compassion on) and the noun **רַחֲמִים** (loving feeling or compassion).⁶

King David ties these three concepts together in Psalm 51. He prays to God, “Have mercy on me according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions” (v 1). David asks the Lord to have mercy on him (**רַחֲמֵךְ**) and take away his sins. He bases his plea on God’s **רַחֲמִים** (unfailing love) and on his **רָחַם** (compassion). He can ask for forgiveness not because of some inherently good quality in himself (vv 3–5) but because of God’s qualities of grace, mercy and love.

These qualities of grace, mercy and love in God express themselves in forgiving sins. God demonstrated this when he caused his goodness to pass before Moses and proclaimed his name to him. “He passed in front of Moses proclaiming, ‘The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate (**רַחֲמִים**) and gracious (**רַחֲמִים**) God, slow to anger, abounding in love (**רַחֲמִים**) and faithfulness, maintaining love (**רַחֲמִים**) to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin’” (Ex 34:6, 7). In the Old Testament grace is God’s favor which moves him to forgive sins.

Grace in the New Testament is usually expressed by the noun **χάρις**. **χάρις** is closely related to **ἀγάπη**, **ἔλεος** and **οἰκτιρμός**. Grace is God’s favor toward fallen mankind. It is God’s kindly disposition toward man, not something in man. St. Paul writes, “If by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace” (Ro 11:6). “You are not under law, but under grace” (Ro 6:14). Since grace is the opposite of “works” or being “under law,” it removes every thought of man’s efforts or accomplishments.

ἀγάπη is God’s undeserved love for mankind. It moved him to sacrifice his Son for the sins of the world. “God so loved (**ἠγάπησεν**) the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16).

ἔλεος and **οἰκτιρμός** express God’s love “moved by man’s misery.”⁷ These vocables are equivalent to our English words mercy, pity and compassion.

In the New Testament, too, God’s grace is his undeserved favor, his kindly disposition toward fallen mankind. It is not a gift which God gives us (*gratis infusa*), but a quality in God himself (*gratuitus favor Dei*).

CHARACTERISTICS OF SAVING GRACE

It is undeserved

No one can understand grace unless he first understands original sin and the total depravity of every member of the human race.

When Adam fell into sin, the whole world fell with him. All mankind came under God’s just condemnation. “Just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all have sinned...the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men” (Ro 5:12, 18).

Sin did not stop with our first parents but has been passed down from parent to child ever since. “Flesh gives birth to flesh” (Jn 3:6). Because every human being has inherited a sinful nature from his parents, he is

³ R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), Vol. I, p 693.

⁴ William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p 110.

⁵ Harris, op. cit., Vol. I, pp 305–307.

⁶ Holladay, op. cit., p 337.

⁷ Joh. P. Meyer, *Dogmatics Notes* (Mequon: Seminary Mimeo Co., 1979), Vol. I, p 37.

sinful from the very moment of conception. King David confesses, “Surely I was a sinner at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (Ps 51:5).

This inherited sinfulness displays a hostility toward God. By nature we are at war with him. “The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God” (Ro 8:7, 8). Our sinful nature rebels against God. Our sinful hearts overflow with evil thoughts, words and actions (Mt 15:19).

By nature we are slaves to sin and Satan. Although we have a measure of free will in external things, we have no free will in spiritual matters. Although we have the free will to read the Bible or listen to a sermon, we have no free will to accept or believe what we hear. We have no capacity to apply ourselves to God’s grace or to find God or to invite him into our hearts or lives. The Bible tells us that by nature we are spiritually dead and incapable of understanding or accepting the message of the gospel. Paul writes, “As for you, you were dead in your trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1). And again, “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor 2:14).

We did not inherit a mere spiritual weakness, but a total spiritual depravity. “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one” (Ro 3:10–12).

The Formula of Concord correctly rejects the teaching that

...in man the human nature and essence are not entirely corrupt, but that man still has some good in him even in spiritual things, namely, capacity, skill, aptness or ability in spiritual things to begin, to work, or to help working for something good.⁸

God does not owe us his grace or favor. He does not owe us salvation. The only thing that God owes us is eternal punishment for our sins. “The wages of sin is death” (Ro 6:23). God would be perfectly fair and just if he sent the whole world to hell. That is what we deserve.

Nor can anyone boast or brag that he is worthy or deserving of eternal life. The law holds all of us accountable to God for our sins. “Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God” (Ro 3:19). There is nothing in us to prompt God to forgive and save us. The motive to save us lies entirely in God himself. Our Lord himself told his Old Testament people and he tells us, “You have burdened me with your sins and wearied me with your offenses. I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions *for my own sake*, and remembers your sins no more” (Is 43:24, 25).

Unless we proclaim God’s law in all its severity, *sola gratia* loses its importance. Unless we lead people to recognize their sin and the eternal punishment their sin deserves, they cannot appreciate all that God in his grace has done to save them. Unless people are led to despair of contributing to their own salvation in any way, they will try to take credit for their salvation. And if a person tries to take any credit at all for his salvation, the very concept of grace is destroyed. Salvation is either by grace alone, or it is not by grace at all.

It is active

Man cannot do anything to save himself. God in his grace and mercy resolved to do everything for man. In eternity he planned our salvation, and in time he carried out his plan, doing everything that was necessary. The Bible declares that God “has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done, but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Tm 1:9, 10).

⁸ *Formula of Concord*, Ep, I, 16 (*Triglotta*, 783).

It is in Christ

There is no saving grace apart from Christ. God's grace (love) prompted him to send his Son into the world to save us (Jn 3:16), and God graciously forgives us because Jesus satisfied the demands of God's justice.

God demanded perfect obedience to his law. "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law" (Ga 3:10; cf. also 1 Pe 1:15, 16). As our Substitute, Jesus kept the law in our place. "God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons" (Ga 4:4, 5; cf. Ro 5:19).

God's justice also demanded punishment for our sins. Jesus suffered that punishment for us. He took our place. As the prophet foretold, "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed" (Is 53:5). God does not count our sins against us because he counted them against Jesus. Because of his death our status before God has changed from being regarded as guilty to being regarded as innocent; for "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them" (2 Cor 5:19).⁹

In Christ God graciously redeems, reconciles and forgives us. "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace" (Eph 1:7). Apart from Christ there is no grace and no salvation. "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Ac 4:12).

It is universal

God's grace goes out to all mankind. "God so loved *the world* that he gave his one and only Son" (Jn 3:16). Jesus died on the cross not just for the sins of some, but for the sins of all. "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 Jn 2:2). Just as all people are sinful by nature and under God's just condemnation, so also God has now declared all people innocent (this is called objective or universal justification) because of Christ's work of redemption. "Just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men" (Ro 5:18). God has reconciled the whole world. He has forgiven every human being. "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them" (2 Cor 5:19).

The fact that grace is universal and that God has declared the whole world innocent is extremely important for our peace of mind. When our sins trouble us and our conscience torments us, we can take refuge in this declaration of universal forgiveness. If God's forgiveness was meant only for some, how could we ever be sure it was meant for us? It has been well said that "unless grace does all (*sola gratia*), the sinner is lost. And unless grace is for all (*gratia universalis*), the sinner must despair."¹⁰

It is complete

God's grace provided everything that was necessary for our salvation. Jesus kept the law perfectly in our place. He suffered all the punishment that our sins deserved. He took away our every sin. "The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from every sin" (1 Jn 1:7). When Jesus said on the cross, "It is finished" (Jn 19:30), he was declaring that he had accomplished everything. There is nothing left for us to do. There is nothing that we can contribute to our salvation in any way. In fact, if we try to contribute to our salvation, we lose it, as Paul warned the Galatians, "You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace" (Ga 5:4).

⁹ Joh. P. Meyer, *Ministers of Christ* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1963), pp 106–117.

¹⁰ Th. Engelder, W. Arndt, Th. Graebner, F.E. Mayer, *Popular Symbolics* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1934), p 173.

It is certain

Christianity is not a religion of doubt or uncertainty. God does not want us to be in the dark about our soul's salvation. He does not want us to be unsure of his love for us.

Since saving grace is universal and complete, it is also certain. It is sure because it rests on God's promises, and God cannot lie. "No matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ" (2 Cor 1:20; cf. also He 6:18 and Tt 1:2). Nothing can change what he has said. He will always remain faithful to his word. "If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself" (2 Tm 2:13).

Our salvation is certain, not because of anything we have done, but because God has done everything for us. We can be sure of God's grace and love for us, not because we feel loved or feel saved, but because God in his Word has assured us of his love and forgiveness. We don't need evidences of his grace in good health or wealth or success; we have all the evidence we need in the fact that he sacrificed his Son for our sins. Our salvation is therefore sure even when we don't feel saved or loved or when our whole life seems to be crashing down around us. Our certainty rests on the objective truth of God's Word, not on subjective feelings.

It is ours through faith

We receive the benefits of God's saving grace through faith. "It is by grace you have been saved through faith" (Eph 2:8). A person is either a believer or an unbeliever. Faith receives God's grace and blessings. Unbelief rejects them. "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him" (Jn 3:36).

It is free and unconditional

We are saved by grace *alone*. There are no conditions we must meet. There are no strings attached. Salvation is God's free gift. "There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified *freely* by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Ro 3:23, 24). Salvation is God's free gift. If we did anything at all to earn or deserve it, it would no longer be a gift. If we had to offer something for it, it would not be free. "Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness" (Ro 4:4, 5). Grace and merit or works are mutually exclusive terms (Ro 11:6).

Even faith is not a condition which we must meet in order to be saved, but it is simply the way God has chosen to have us receive salvation. Paul makes that clear in his letter to the Ephesians. He carefully piles up term after term to let us know that faith is not a good work which merits salvation or a condition to be met to gain salvation. "It is *by grace* you have been saved, through faith—and this *not from yourselves*, it is the *gift of God—not by works*, so that *no one can boast*" (Eph 2:8, 9). Salvation by faith alone guarantees that salvation is by grace alone. "The promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace" (Ro 4:16). The reason faith saves is because the object of faith is Jesus.

It is offered and conveyed through the gospel

The word gospel means good news. It is good news because it is the proclamation of God's grace. That is why it is called "the gospel of God's grace" (Ac 20:24). It is the message that God has been gracious to the world. It is the message that the world is reconciled and forgiven (2 Co 5:18–21). It is God's decree of amnesty to a world in rebellion against him. It is his decree that he has forgiven all the sins of all people of all time.

The gospel is the means of grace, the means by which we become partakers of the benefits of God's grace. In fact, God's saving grace does not come to us apart from the gospel. St. Paul writes, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?" (Ro 10:13–14). The implication of the apostle's

questions is clear. Without the gospel, no one will be saved; for “faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Ro 10:17). Baptism and the Lord’s Supper offer and convey God’s grace to us because of the gospel promises attached to them (cf. Tt 3:3–7 and Mt 26:27–28).

That is why mission work is so vitally important. There is no salvation apart from the means of grace. Those who die without the gospel will be lost forever.

It is effective

God’s saving grace is effective in accomplishing its purpose. Jesus not only did everything that was necessary to secure our salvation, his grace is also effective in bringing all the benefits of salvation to us. The Bible calls the gospel (the means of grace) “the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Ro 1:16). God’s gracious message will always produce the results God wants. He assures us, “My word...will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Is 55:11).

Our Lord has commissioned his church to make disciples of all nations, and he has given us the only means that can accomplish that task, the means of grace, the gospel in the Word and the sacraments (Mt 28:19, 20). When we remember the primary function of the church and faithfully use the means that God has instituted, God will grant the kind of success he wants whether we always see it or not.

The gospel also has the power to produce the fruit (good works) God wants to see in the lives of his people. The law exposes sin and reveals God’s will. That is the purpose of the law. But since the law cannot produce faith, it cannot produce the fruit which flows from faith. The law demands a life of love. But only God’s love for us will produce that love in our lives. “We love because he first loved us” (1 Jn 4:19). The more people recognize all the grace God has shown them, the more they will want to thank him by living according to his will.

It is resistible

Even though God’s power is in his message of grace, grace can be resisted and rejected. Our Savior was filled with sorrow because of the stubborn resistance of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but *you were not willing*” (Mt 23:37; cf. also Ac 7:51).

OPPOSITION TO THE TEACHING OF SOLA GRATIA

There is nothing more comforting than the teaching that we are saved by God’s grace alone. And yet throughout history people have opposed and contradicted it; for every human being wants to take credit for his own salvation. The idea that we can save ourselves by the things that we do or don’t do (*opinio legis*) is ingrained in our sinful nature.

The rich young man came to Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?” (Mt 19:16). That is the very question that every human being asks because by nature we think that we can do something to save ourselves. Our sinful nature doesn’t like to hear that on our own we are hopelessly lost or that we cannot contribute to our salvation in any way, and it doesn’t believe it. That is why every religion in this world with the exception of Christianity teaches work righteousness in one form or another. Our sinful nature is proud. It wants salvation its own way. It cannot conceive of God’s plan of salvation by grace alone (1 Cor 2:9) and refuses to accept it when it is revealed (1 Cor 2:14). It always wants to take credit, even if it is only a little bit.

History demonstrates that God’s people are not immune to that temptation. False teachers and teachings have regularly challenged the truth that we are saved by grace alone. The Pharisees had the Old Testament with all of God’s gracious promises to send a Savior from sin. The Old Testament sacrifices reminded them constantly of their need for a Savior. But they perverted God’s plan of salvation and made it into a legalistic

system of work righteousness. They rejected Jesus because they saw no need for the kind of Savior he came to be. They thought they could save themselves.

During the apostolic period the Judaizers claimed Jesus as their Savior, but they demanded the observance of certain regulations of the law as also necessary for salvation. Paul told them that they had fallen from grace because they had tried to add something to God's grace (Ga 5:4).

In the fourth century after Christ a monk by the name of Pelagius (ca. 360–420) denied original sin and taught that man had freedom to choose either good or evil. A life without sin was possible. Christ was the great example and teacher of morals, not our Savior through whose death alone we may receive eternal life. Man's salvation ultimately depended on what man did for himself, not on what Christ had done for him.¹¹

St. Augustine opposed Pelagius by insisting on the total depravity of man and salvation by God's grace alone. Pelagianism and semi-pelagianism (the teaching that man retains an impaired free will after the Fall and needs the help of God's grace for salvation) were rejected by several councils in the ancient church. But since even Augustine had trouble distinguishing between grace as a quality or attitude in God and grace as something which God works in man (he did not clearly distinguish between justification and sanctification), a form of semi-pelagianism eventually dominated in the visible church.¹²

At the time of the Reformation, Erasmus recognized that the real difference between Luther and Rome lay in whether natural man has a will that is free or a will that is in bondage to sin and Satan. On the basis of clear Scripture, Luther taught the latter and fought for the truth that we are saved by God's grace alone. The Council of Trent made Rome's error official:

If anyone saith that by faith alone the impious is justified, in such wise to mean that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification, and that it is not in any way necessary that he be prepared and disposed by the movement of his own will, let him be anathema (Council of Trent, Session VI, Canon 9).¹³

Other problems also developed at the time of the Reformation. The Anabaptists denied the necessity of the means of grace and thought that the Holy Ghost speaks directly to men and works in their hearts apart from the gospel. This teaching was also held by the Swiss Reformer Zwingli. The certainty of salvation is then made dependent on subjective experience rather than on the objective truth of God's Word. The Anabaptists' denial of original sin was also at the heart of their rejection of infant baptism.

The sinful mind of man has always wondered why some are saved and others are not. The Bible does not answer that question for us. It simply teaches that if we are saved, it is all God's doing (Eph 2:8, 9); and if we are lost, it is all our own fault (Mt 23:37). Human logic and reason balk at this and attempt to answer the question by either blaming God for those who are lost or finding in man a reason why he is saved when others are not.

John Calvin answered that question by denying universal justification. He taught that God not only has predestined some to heaven, but that he has also predestined others to hell. He taught a predestination of some to hell even though the Bible knows nothing of it and actually contradicts it. The Scriptures declare, "God our Savior...wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Tm 2:4).

Although Calvin believed in the total depravity of man, his teaching of a limited atonement actually fostered subjectivism, for if Jesus did not die for all, people must look inside themselves to be sure of their salvation. A Calvinist finds his assurance of salvation in his feelings that he is saved. He finds the evidence that he is a believer in his religious activity, in the good works that he performs.

But Calvin not only denied the universal character of God's grace; his whole approach to theology and Christian life was legalistic and reveals a terrible confounding of law and gospel.

¹¹ E. H. Klotsche, *The History of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), pp 85–86.

¹² *Ibid.*, p 92.

¹³ Quoted in Engelder, *op. cit.*, pp 173.

Calvin emphasizes the significance of the law for the believer in such a way that a marked legalism characterizes his theology... Speaking of the significance of the law for the regenerate, Calvin calls “the third use of the law the ‘principal one’—and which is more nearly connected to the proper end of it.” He compares the relation of the believer to the law to that of a “servant” to his “master.” “By frequent meditation on the law the servant of Christ will be excited to obedience... To the flesh the law serves as a whip, urging it, like a dull and tardy animal, forward to its work; and even to the spiritual man, who is not yet delivered from the burden of his flesh, it will be a perpetual spur, that will not permit him to loiter” (II. 7, 12). Commandment, law, duty, servant, obedience—these terms are expressive of the rigorous legalism which characterizes Calvin’s concept of Christianity. Luther teaches that the regenerate is ever “ready and cheerful, without coercion, to do good to every one, to serve every one, and to suffer everything for love and praise to God.”¹⁴

Jacob Arminius tried to find in man himself the answer to the question why some are saved and others are not saved. His answer was synergism. Those who are saved are saved because they cooperated in their conversion by means of their “free will.” God in eternity predestined those who he foresaw would remain steadfast in faith to their end. Faith then is the cause of election, not the result. Faith becomes a condition man must meet in order to be saved. *Sola gratia* is destroyed.

Arminian theology was adopted by John and Charles Wesley, the founders of Methodism. From Methodism it passed into the Holiness and Pentecostal denominations and has become the dominant theology among Protestants today.

Nor has the Lutheran Church been spared problems related to the teaching of *sola gratia*. After Luther’s death there arose several errors which undermined *sola gratia*. These errors were exposed and rejected in the Formula of Concord. Later on, Pietism in the Lutheran Church tended to undermine *sola gratia* because it placed greater emphasis on sanctification than on justification and on deeds than on creeds.

In the late 1800s in our own country conservative Lutherans were drawn into the election controversy. Some were teaching that God predestined us in view of faith (*intuitu fidei*). Prof. Adolf Hoenecke of our seminary led our synod to back Walther and the Missouri Synod in defending the scriptural truth of election by God’s grace alone; for if there were any reason at all in us why God chose us instead of others, then it could no longer be called an election of grace.

During the early 1900s several intersynodical conferences were held in an attempt to heal the rift between the various midwestern synods over the doctrine of election and other problems. Members of our seminary faculty participated in these conferences and defended the principle of *sola gratia*. In an attempt to solve these problems an intersynodical committee drew up a document called the Chicago Theses, but this attempt failed when the theses were rejected. When the *Common Confession* of the Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church did not clearly reject the American Lutheran Conference’s (ALC’s) errors of denying universal justification and its teaching of synergism in conversion and election *intuitu fidei*, our seminary faculty led our synod in a protest against the document and Missouri’s involvement.¹⁵ Prof. Joh. P. Meyer defended the teaching of objective or universal justification against the errors of the ALC’s Lenski.¹⁶

We dare never take for granted the heritage our forefathers have left us. Each generation must make the truths of Scripture its own and apply those truths to the problems and errors of its day. That is the only way we can guard against false doctrine and false practice.

¹⁴ Klotsche, op. cit., p 238.

¹⁵ Eleven tracts were issued by our Wisconsin Synod’s Conference of Presidents in the early 1950s under the overall title “Continuing in His Word.” The following are pertinent to the problems with *sola gratia* in the Common Confession: Tract #2—“1938–1953,” Tract #3—“Every Sinner Declared Righteous,” Tract #4—“Not By My Own Reason Or Strength” and Tract #6—“Chosen by Grace from Eternity.”

¹⁶ *Ministers of Christ*, pp 114–115.

SOME PRESENT TROUBLES

Misunderstanding of the mission of the church

Our Savior outlined the mission of the church when he told his followers, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Mt 28:19, 20). That mission is a spiritual mission. Repentance and forgiveness of sins are to be preached in Jesus’ name to all nations (Lk 24:47). That involves the preaching of the law to point out sin, sin’s condemnation and the need for a Savior. That means proclaiming Jesus as the only Savior from sin.

We will then use the law to show grateful children of God how they are to live as God’s people. This includes teaching Christians to have a concern for those in need. Although the apostles and the early Christians engaged in organized charitable work, they were careful not to let that work interfere with their main task of preaching and teaching God’s Word (Ac 4:32–37; 6:1–7). As charitable organizations and other auxiliary groups multiply in our congregations and synod, we will want to make sure that they do not interfere with the mission of the church to preach the gospel.

The Roman Catholic Church has always dabbled in politics. Since the days of Calvin and Zwingli the Reformed also have had trouble separating church and state. They have tried to transform society with the implementation of laws enforced by the state. In the early 20th century this tendency blossomed into the social gospel movement. Its founding father was Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918). Its aim was to transform society on earth into “the kingdom of God” through social reform and political action.¹⁷ The National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches have a similar aim today. Concern for the eternal salvation of the individual sinner plays second fiddle to the reformation of society through political action, if it is allowed to play at all.

In recent decades a new, more radical movement has arrived on the world scene. Liberation theology attempts to cross Christianity with Marxist political thought and has created a religious/political movement which sees capitalism as the root of all evil. Salvation of the soul is no longer relevant. Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross no longer has any saving significance for eternity. Life on this earth is all-important. A spokesman for the movement, Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Roman Catholic priest, writes, “Augustine’s emphasis upon spiritual salvation fit the needs of his day... The building of a just society today is a ‘salvific’ work in which the church must be involved.”¹⁸

Today in our country we are hearing religious voices not only on the political left but also on the right calling the church to political involvement. The Moral Majority and other voices of the religious right urge pastors and congregations to help transform society through political action and pressure.

When we see all the evils in our country, political activism becomes enticing. But the only way for the church to transform society is by transforming individual hearts through the preaching of the gospel. One cannot make society Christian by passing laws; but one can make society more Christian through God’s message of grace. That message alone can make more Christians. Christian citizens will then work as a leaven for good in society.

God has not called the church to govern society but to preach the gospel. He has given the state the task of governing. When both church and state carry out their respective tasks, society prospers. When the church starts dabbling in politics, not only will the preaching of God’s grace be diminished, but the church will find itself faced with more and more governmental interference.

Misdirected Christian hope

¹⁷ Tim Dawley, *Eerdman’s Handbook to the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p 594.

¹⁸ Quoted by E.H. Wendland, “A Theology of Liberation,” *WLQ*, Vol. 77, No. 2, (April 1980), p 123.

Many of the Jews of Jesus' day were looking for a messiah who would restore political glory to the nation of Israel. They were looking for a savior who would rescue them from all of life's problems and who would create a heaven on earth. They were looking for a "bread-king" who would give them a life of ease and provide them with all they needed (Jn 6:1–15). They had a carnal concept of Christianity and left Jesus when they found out he had come to be their Savior from sin and to establish a spiritual instead of an earthly kingdom (Jn 6:25–71).

Many people today seem to be looking for the same kind of Savior as the Jews of Jesus' day. They want tangible proof of God's love. They want to see proof of God's power. The gospel of forgiveness is not enough. They want to see success in their lives. They want Christianity to give them a heaven on earth.

Our people are exposed to that kind of theology on radio and TV and the religious books they are reading. Many of today's television evangelists and religious authors seem to give the impression that once a person becomes a Christian he can expect all kinds of success in his life. That becomes a proof that he is a Christian. Listen to the testimonials that are so much a part of so many of these programs. Television preacher and author Robert Schuller writes:

As Christians we believe in success. Why? Because the alternative is disaster. God is not honored in our poverty or sickness. He is glorified in our accomplishments!¹⁹

If you want to succeed personally, corporately, or in a family way, you have to LET GO AND LET GOD run your life and business...All you have to do is learn how to manage ideas...I've developed a science of how to manage ideas. It's theological, psychological and spiritual. It's letting go and giving control to God.²⁰

The Pentecostals and charismatics look for assurance of their salvation in the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the accompanying signs of speaking in tongues and faith healing. They want a demonstration of God's power. It is God's will for you to be well, they claim. Jesus' death won for you not only freedom from sin, but also freedom from sickness and pain. Healing is available to you. Just give yourself to God, and he will make it happen for you. Larry Christenson, a Lutheran charismatic, has written:

Healing was never meant to be an option in the Christian church—something that's all right for those who like to go off on special tangents. The ministry of healing is part of the Gospel, and therefore it is an obligation.²¹

But what happens when a Christian's business fails? What happens when sickness or injury incapacitates him and no help, no healing, is forthcoming? Where is the evidence of God's grace?

As Lutheran Christians we find the answer in the objective truth of the gospel. We have no right to demand signs from God to prove his power and his love. He has given us all the proof we need in the Holy Scriptures and in sacrificing his own Son for the sins of the world. When we recognize all of God's grace and mercy in saving us from our sins, we will recognize his love even in the hardships he permits to come into our lives. The Bible encourages us, "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves" (He 12:5, 6). The Lord told St. Paul when he was suffering from his "thorn in the flesh," "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Co 12:9).

Minimizing sin

¹⁹ Robert H. Schuller, *Living Powerfully One Day At A Time* (Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1982), p 202.

²⁰ Ibid., p 353.

²¹ Larry Christenson, *The Charismatic Renewal Among Lutherans* (Minneapolis: Lutheran Charismatic Renewal Services, 1976), pp 98–99.

Ever since the Fall, sinful human beings have been trying to minimize their guilt and shift the blame for their sins. Remember how Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent. In reality both were blaming God.

Modern man denies that there are any moral absolutes. There is no such thing as an immutable holy will of God. Morality is relative. What is right and what is wrong depends on your upbringing or the culture in which you were raised or what will give the greatest happiness or what is most expedient or what is best for society at a given moment.²²

People see as wrong only gross sins which harm others, and even then our society makes excuses. One secular writer has noted that we no longer speak of things as being right or wrong. If someone does something wrong, it is not labeled as such, but is passed off as being stupid or dumb or sick. Even atrocities committed by terrorists or others fighting for a cause are at times excused by an “end justifies the means” mentality. If the cause is just, then the other side must have deserved what was done to it.²³

When sin is not recognized as sin, however, people will see no need for a Savior. If there are no absolute standards of right and wrong, God would not be fair to punish eternally. If God is not going to punish eternally, our Savior’s role shifts from one of atoning for sin to one of setting an example.

Much of modern theology minimizes grace because it minimizes sin. Arminianism has always denied the doctrine of total depravity. Theologians like Bultmann, Tillich and Barth have influenced much of contemporary Christian theology with their denial of original sin, total depravity or the reality of sin at all.²⁴

Popular preachers like Robert Schuller change the Bible’s definition of sin, as was noted a few years ago in an essay on grace as the foundation for ethics,

Schuller...gives his own definition of sin: “Any human condition or act that robs God of glory by stripping one of his children of their right to divine dignity.” Schuller rejects any view of sin that causes me “to feel bad about myself.” Thus, in a noteworthy comment in which he claims to give a “clear and Christ-like understanding of sin,” Schuller writes: “...at the deepest level, the heart of sin is found in what it causes us to do to ourselves. The most serious sin is the one that causes me to say, ‘I am unworthy. I may have no claim to divine sonship if you examine me at my worst.’ For once a person believes he is an ‘unworthy sinner,’ it is doubtful if he can really honestly accept the saving grace offered in Jesus Christ.”²⁵

Even otherwise orthodox preachers can be guilty of minimizing sin when they become so preoccupied with preaching about the gross sins of the world that they fail to mention the sins of the heart which afflict all their members. If the preacher is preoccupied with the sins of abortion, drug abuse and pornography, he will give the impression that the sins of selfishness, greed and lust, which lie in the heart of each of us, are somehow less worthy of God’s condemnation. Such preaching is likely to create a congregation of pharisees who pat themselves on the back for being such good Christians while they look down their noses at all the other terrible sinners in society. Such preaching is likely to create a congregation of people who think that somehow God owes them salvation or, at least, that they are more worthy or deserving of salvation than others.

We will therefore want to preach the law in such a way that people recognize the condition of their heart. Our preaching will be pointed; it will not be merely a general recital of the fact that all people are sinful and deserve to be punished eternally. We will want to preach in such a way that a person knows, “That means me. I am guilty. I deserve God’s wrath and punishment.” Then the good news of God’s mercy and forgiveness will become all the more precious to our people.

²² Wayne M. Borgwardt, “Contemporary Humanism and the Moral Life,” an essay delivered to the Metro-South Pastoral Conference meeting in Racine, Wisconsin, February 16, 1987.

²³ Meg Greenfield, “Why Nothing Is ‘Wrong’ Anymore,” *Reader’s Digest*, November 1986, pp 129ff, condensed from *Newsweek*.

²⁴ “Theses on Justification: A Review and Analysis from the Commission on Inter-Church Relations,” *WLQ*, Vol. 81, No. 1 (Winter 1984), p 47.

²⁵ Jeffrey Gibbs, “The Grace of God as the Foundation for Ethics,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, April/July 1984, p 189.

Proclaiming a conditional gospel

In conversion the Holy Ghost creates in the heart of a contrite sinner faith which lays hold of Christ and his work of redemption. Conversion is entirely the work of the Holy Ghost because man by nature is spiritually dead and cannot understand or accept the message of the gospel (Eph 2:4, 5; 1 Cor 2:14). Faith is a gift which God gives to us without any effort on our part (Eph 2:8, 9).

Synergism sees another cause of conversion in man. Man has the power in himself to accept the salvation God offers. Decision theology claims that unconverted man must ask Jesus to come into his life. That is the condition man must meet for salvation. Schuller writes,

The Bible makes it very clear that if you ask Jesus to come into your life, He will do it. That's a fact. The Bible teaches it and I know it works. Receiving Christ into your life is an act of the intellect. It is an act of the will, not an act of the heart. It is not emotional; it is volitional.²⁶

Billy Graham asks people to make a decision for Christ. "Evangelical" groups working the campuses of our nation's colleges and universities are thoroughly synergistic in their teaching of conversion. An Inter-Varsity fellowship pamphlet entitled "Becoming a Christian" includes a prayer for the person who wants to become a Christian. The prayer concludes:

So now I come to Thee. I believe that for a long time Thou hast been standing patiently outside the door knocking. I now open the door. Come in, Lord Jesus, and be my Saviour and Lord for ever. Amen.²⁷

Since decision theology is the theology of the most active Evangelical groups in our country, our people are constantly being exposed to it on religious radio and television, in religious books and periodicals and in Christian contemporary music.²⁸ Since synergism appeals to the *opinio legis* in the sinful nature of every human being, decision theology and every other kind of conditional gospel present a real danger to the members of our congregations.

We will therefore want to be careful in our preaching, teaching and counseling that we do not reinforce this kind of thinking by proclaiming a conditional gospel ourselves. Statements like these have no place: "If you are really sorry for your sins, Jesus will forgive you"; or, "If you believe, God will forgive you"; or telling a child, "Jesus won't love you if you do that." Such statements destroy God's grace by making his love or forgiveness dependent on something in us or on something that we do. Proclaiming a conditional gospel robs people of comfort and the certainty of salvation; for if our salvation depends in any way on something we do or on conditions we must meet, we can never be certain that we have done enough.

When people confess their sins to us, we are to assure them of God's full and complete forgiveness immediately. We are not to set a level of contrition or a degree of sorrow that a person must reach before we offer God's forgiveness. We are to offer God's forgiveness immediately as Nathan did to David or the father to the prodigal son.

We will want to make sure that objective (universal) justification is the heart of our message. God has declared the whole world innocent for Christ's sake. God has forgiven the sins of all, whether they know it or not or whether they believe it or not. When objective justification is denied, faith becomes a condition of salvation instead of the means through which we receive salvation.²⁹

²⁶ Schuller, op. cit., p 379.

²⁷ John R. W. Scott, "Becoming a Christian" (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Fellowship, 25th printing, 1972), p 14.

²⁸ Klemet Preus, "Contemporary Christian Music: An Evaluation," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, January 1987, pp 2-7, 13-14.

²⁹ Leroy Dobberstein, "The Doctrine of Justification in the Light of Present Problems," *WLQ*, Vol. 84, No. 1 (Winter 1987).

When speaking of salvation, we don't want to turn a person's attention inward to his faith, but outward to the grace of God. Preaching about faith will not produce faith, but proclaiming God's love and mercy and forgiveness will produce believing hearts.

THE SEMINARY'S CONTINUING PURPOSE—TRAINING PARISH PASTORS

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary was founded in 1863 to train parish pastors who would also be confessional Lutherans. *Sola gratia* is as important for that purpose today as it was in 1863. A correct understanding of *sola gratia* is vitally important for virtually every aspect of a pastor's work.

For preaching

As pastors, we reach more people more often through preaching than through any other aspect of our work. Our seminary homiletics professors taught us the importance of being evangelical preachers. They taught us to do a thorough text study to understand what God is saying. They taught us to apply the text first to ourselves to expose our own sin and need for a Savior and to see God's full and free forgiveness before we try to preach to others. A Lutheran pulpit is no place for a pharisee.

We are to prepare our sermons carefully to be certain that each sermon both convicts and comforts. We will not pull any punches in our preaching of the law, but we will preach it in all its forcefulness. We cannot make any excuses for sin nor let our hearers do so. We will preach in such way that every individual will be convicted of his sins and will have to confess that he deserves God's punishment.

But we will also proclaim the gospel of God's grace in all its sweetness. We will want to portray our Savior's love and forgiveness, his suffering and death vividly. Preaching the gospel doesn't mean merely mentioning the word gospel or using technical terms like justification. It means proclaiming the historical facts of our Savior's life and explaining the saving significance of those events. It means portraying our Savior's love and mercy, not in tired cliches, but in clear and sincere expressions born of deep conviction. Although we cannot make the gospel more effective, we can hinder it when we proclaim it in an apathetic or insincere way. Preaching the gospel means proclaiming God's unconditional forgiveness so that everyone will know that God has forgiven all of his sins, no matter how horrible they might be.

We want to strive to be practical preachers applying both law and gospel to the problems, temptations and opportunities for service our people meet every day of their lives.

For teaching

Our professors also taught us to prepare carefully for all of our various instruction and Bible classes. Our goal is to lead our people to an ever deeper understanding of the Holy Scriptures and to an ever clearer recognition of their own sinfulness and an ever deeper appreciation of God's amazing grace. Our aim is to touch the heart, not merely to impart head knowledge. We are not merely teaching facts, but we will also want to explain the significance of those facts for this life and the life to come.

For counseling

In counseling we will never hesitate to apply the law to expose sin and excuses for sin. We will also offer God's unconditional forgiveness to those who confess their sins. We will be careful not to set levels for contrition or insist on certain fruits of repentance before announcing God's forgiveness. We will not express shock at the sins of those who come to speak with us, but we will recognize that we are as unworthy of God's grace as any of them. Our privilege is to lift their burden of sin and guilt by pointing them to Jesus, who died for the sins of all.

For visiting the sick and shut in

When sickness or injury strikes, when physical strength disappears, when people approach death, they are often assailed by doubts. Satan uses these occasions to try to make people doubt God's love for them or to remind them of their sins. That is why the message of God's forgiving grace is so vitally important. We will want to be sympathetic with those who are in pain and with those whose strength is failing or who are approaching death's door, and we will want to comfort them with the knowledge that a loving God still holds them in his hand.

For carrying out discipline

We are not doing people any favors when we let them continue in their sin as if sin is of no consequence. The church body that does not carry out church discipline will eventually lose the gospel. We will not, however, approach the task of carrying out church discipline with the idea that we are going to clean house. Church discipline has the salvation of the sinner as its goal. We will seek to regain the straying by pointing out their sins and sin's consequences so that they do not turn their backs on the gospel of forgiveness.

For evangelism

Every Christian pastor is concerned about those who do not know that Jesus is their Savior; but when reaching out to the lost, we will remember that only the gospel has the power to convert. We will want to avoid the temptation to try to pressure prospects or to use external means to try to accomplish what only the means of grace can do. We will be careful not to give in to the temptation to weaken the message of the law or any teaching of Scripture; and we will never hesitate to proclaim God's unconditional forgiveness to those who so desperately need to hear it.

For personal growth

There is no greater privilege in this life than being a minister of the gospel. But pastors are not free from problems of frustration and irritation caused by the sins that so easily beset their people or the lack of visible results in their work or the apparent lack of fruits of faith among their people. We begin to think that success depends on us instead of on God. We have the *opinio legis* in us, too. We like to take credit. The gospel doesn't always work as quickly as we would like. Things don't always go as we hoped or planned. We set goals and don't reach them. We work hard yet often don't see the success we wanted or the results we anticipated. In dealing with delinquents or divorce or discipline cases of other kinds, we don't always see the fruit for which we hoped. Frustration and irritation and impatience can easily lead to legalism or attempts to force sanctification.

We will therefore want to resist the temptation to see our people as statistics or problems rather than as precious souls for whom Jesus died. We will want to resist the temptation to find short cuts or sure-fire methods for success. There is no substitute for the study of the Scriptures. We will want to make the daily study of God's Word a priority for our own spiritual health as well as for the spiritual health of our congregations. We will also want to review the Lutheran Confessions regularly. Our time is far better spent in the study of the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions than in reading Reformed "how to" books. Methods and strategies are seldom neutral, but reflect the theology and doctrinal background of their authors. Since the Reformed have a faulty understanding of grace and the means of grace, their methods can become their means for achieving the results they want.

We will therefore be very careful that the methods we choose and adopt reflect proper scriptural principles. Thank God for all God-pleasing methodology, but remember that only the means of grace will produce the results that God wants.

We will not want to make excuses for our laziness or past failures to carry out God's will, but we will confess those sins and recognize that our Savior died for the sins of laziness and half-hearted efforts, too. His forgiveness will prompt us to greater efforts in the future. There is no substitute for God's message of grace for us or our people. There is no substitute for law and gospel properly distinguished and applied for solving the problems that face the church today.

CONCLUSION

The theology of a church body ultimately depends on the theology of its seminary and the pastors that seminary trains. For 125 years Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary has by God's grace been training pastors to take the message of salvation by grace alone to a world which so desperately needs to hear it. May God continue to bless our synod through our seminary. And may he continue to preserve our synod, our seminary and the pastors it trains from every error which would undermine the Reformation principle of *sola gratia*.

"Not to us, O LORD, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness" (Ps 115:1).