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Sola Gratia

“I in vain delighted in thy law according to the inner man,
when another law in my members rebelled against the law of my mind,
leading me captive in the law of sin which was in my members.
That law of sin now is the violence of custom, by which the mind
of man is drawn and holden even against its will; deserving to be
so holden, for that it so willingly slides into that custom. Wretched
I therefore, who could deliver me from the body of this death; but
thy grace only, through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

- Augustine¹

When The Reformation is considered through both a historical and ecclesial lens, the topic of *sola gratia* is often found to be at the top of the conversational agenda. Doctrinal error as recognized by the reformers became the impetus for change, and the effects of that revolution have impacted the church more than perhaps anything else in the last 500 years. “Grace alone” is the trumpet cry of hundreds of years of Protestant thought. It was crucial to Luther and the following Reformers that this crucial doctrine of man’s sin and God’s free gift of grace be recaptured in the church, articulating clearly that man can in no way contribute to his own salvation, but rather we are saved by God’s grace alone through faith.

While just before the Reformation, a traditional view of God’s grace was compromised greatly by the sale of indulgences and the idea that one could assist a deceased individual’s reconciliation to God through prayer, payment, or a perfected nature, it’s crucial to remember that grace has always been an integral part of Roman Catholic theology². There has never been a question as to the necessity of grace in salvation for both the Catholic and Protestant thinker. But this issue of the possibility of a perfected nature in man is a doctrine that divided teachers of the Bible, and threatened the concept embraced by Augustine and other church fathers of *grace alone*. Thomas Aquinas is a champion of the great grace of God in essence as he understands God as radically gracious and man desperately in need of that grace because of sin. It was Aquinas who introduced, however, the idea of a perfected nature, making it possible for man to please God through actions, albeit he argues, that it begins with the gracious activity of God³. Pre-reformation theologians took that concept and exaggerated it greatly, arguing that grace

¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, 8.5

² Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: Part II*, Question 109, Article 3, reads: “It would seem that without grace man cannot love God above all things by his own natural powers. For to love God above all things is the proper and principal act of charity. Now man cannot of himself possess charity, since the “charity of God is poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Ghost Who is given to us,” as is said Romans 5:5. Therefore man by his natural powers alone cannot love God above all things. Further, no nature can rise above itself. But to love God above all things is to tend above oneself. Therefore without the help of grace no created nature can love God above itself.”

³ Aquinas, Question 1, Article 8.

makes it possible for man to be raised to a level of pleasing God through obedience, allowing for deeds to compliment faith in saving activity.

It is the *sola* aspect of this doctrine that is greatly debated, and will be the focus of this paper. We will investigate in what ways grace *alone* is found in Scripture and how that grace *alone* informs our missional ecclesiology. Carl Trueman suggests that though all Christians are agreed on the necessity of grace, the meaning of that term “grace” is the notion that is up for debate⁴. Is man capable of growing in sanctification to the point of being able to please God, or is man wholly dead in sin, and only saved by grace that declares the sinner righteous despite his deadness? I will look at the meaning of grace from both a historical perspective and from the perspective of the church today, with both some critiques and encouragements for us going forward. As we consider how to apply this study to our missional ecclesiology, a historical perspective and biblical reflection can only help to guide us in following Augustine who was floored by God’s grace.

The first step is to see how *grace alone* plays out in redemptive history. In the New Testament, the term *grace* as a noun is found frequently⁵, but this noun is rare in the Old Testament. Instead, more commonly found in the Hebrew is a description of God’s action and character, so more commonly we find in the Hebrew that God is *gracious*⁶. It has always been the case, then, that God in the Bible is defined by his gracious action both as creator and provider, and as the one who responds to man in his sinful condition. Grace is that aspect of divine action by which God blesses his rebellious creatures, whether through preservation (common grace) or salvation (special grace)⁷. Grace is not just something God does, but it is in his very character.

The Exodus is established as the most memorable event in the life of God’s people, as it displays the great grace of God in rescuing his people from under the rule of Egypt and will later typify God’s rescuing his people from sin. God is reconstituting his people Israel and establishing them, not in their own power, but by his gracious action, according to the promises that he made to Abraham. God’s gracious character is evident in the covenantal promises he makes, to prosper a people, to show them his character, and ultimately renew them in their hearts⁸. God’s covenant promises are the basis for the assurance that we share through his grace, as those promises have always come true. God has made these declarations not only through covenants in words to Noah, Abraham, and Moses, but he has shown the Israelites who he is through his gracious action. His willingness to be present with his people through the temple or through Christ himself is his grace poured out on us to grow us and to grow his church. Now through the person of Christ, there are no more barriers to that presence – we have full access to God; an access that makes sense only in light of his radical grace: the temple makes clear the

⁴ Trueman, Carl R. *Grace Alone: Salvation as a Gift of God*, Zondervan, 2011, p. 17

⁵ i.e., Ephesians 2:8, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”

⁶ i.e., Psalm 86:15, “But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.”

⁷ Trueman, p. 25

⁸ G. A. F. Knight goes further when he says, ‘Before that mighty event, then, naturally Israel did not really know his God.... The Exodus event was thus the great creative act of God, for it was that moment when God revealed his inner essence as that of compassion and saving power and purpose’ (*A Christian Theology of the Old Testament*, pp. 45f.).

need for the presence of God to be mediated; only then can we come to God if there is a righteous one advocating for us, and that person is Christ.

When he took this people to Mt. Sinai and was to give them the Law, he famously reminds them of his action in saving them from the Egyptians. “You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself” (Ex. 19:4). This is the prologue to the giving of the law, but the very thing that will serve as a reminder to God’s people whether they are receiving instruction, correction, or promises – that the Lord God is a god of grace; it is who he is. The verse Exodus 14:14 is abstractly emblematic of God’s action in saving people while they were left powerless as they stand on the banks of the Red Sea, when it says, “The Lord will fight for you, you need only to be silent.” Wisdom literature in God’s Word showers its readers with descriptions of God as one who is *merciful* and *gracious*. His actions have matched that description and the followers of God both in that present context and as we read these descriptions today, we’re to understand that grace is who God is in his character. Alongside the descriptions of God as one who is full of grace, we also learn of the seriousness of sin and the inability of man to correct himself, making clear the need for God’s grace, and his grace alone to save a sinner.

In the New Testament, as we see Immanuel come down as the “radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Heb. 1:3a), the grace of God is embodied in the person of Jesus Christ. “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). John directs the reader to places like Exodus 33-34 when Moses begged to see the glory of God, and God says he will let his goodness (glory) to pass by, but in doing so the attributes of God are made visible in that moment, a gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness (Ex. 34:5-7)⁹. Christ came down and “tabernacled”¹⁰ among us, which means that God has always, by his grace, made a way to dwell with his people. He did so by the temple under the Old Covenant, and now through the person of Jesus Christ. While God is known as one who is gracious under the Old Covenant, his promises would find their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus, the perfect spotless Lamb paying the weighty price for sin. That is why it can be said, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ” (Rom. 3:23-24). We are found free from sin only by this gracious act of the sending of second person of the Trinity to be a substitute for those who are in Christ. Further, Paul writing to Titus can say, “For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people” (Titus 2:11). Christ had to come as to not violate the holiness of God, who would deal with the great offense of sin by sending a once-for-all sacrifice for sin.

Pertinent to our discussion here of *sola gratia* is the sufficiency of Christ’s atoning work on the cross as found in the Bible. If this grace finds its fullness in the person of Jesus, then we must understand that Christ and his perfections as an atoning sacrifice is fully sufficient in obtaining salvation for the lost sinner. God’s Word affirms both that man is dead in his sinful state (Eph. 2:1), and only made alive through Christ. Our knowledge of our total depravity in God’s Word informs our understanding of the gracious action of God found in God’s Word.

⁹ Carson, D.A. *The Gospel According to John*, p. 129.

¹⁰ Carson, 126. The Greek verb used ‘skēnoō’ in John 1:14 shows that the use of tabernacle imagery is intentional and full of purpose. God has always sought to dwell with his people and now the Word made flesh dwells amongst us, though without any barrier. The confusion at the Transfiguration speaks to this, when Peter desires to make ‘tabernacles’ for Jesus, Elijah, and Moses, for fear that their brightness would threaten God’s people as in did at Mt. Sinai. They can now be with God in Christ without fear of death.

Calvin reminds us in the Institutes that the knowledge of God and the knowledge of man are intimately connected¹¹. It is by his grace we have been saved (Eph. 2:1-10). It is not as if the sinner needs help finding his way to righteousness, and has some merit in himself with which God can work, instead he finds himself in the morgue, without any to life, except for by the great grace of God. It is here where the recovery of this important doctrine *sola gratia* gained great momentum in the Reformation, as it was the practice of the Roman church at the time to grant and teach the possibility of improvement of one's status by works. VanHoozer reminds us that theologians like Thomas Cajetan advocated for the speculative notion of *natura pura* – a pre-fall state of nature with autonomy and integrity of its one – a doctrine created to preserve the idea from Aquinas that a perfected nature was possible, and God through his grace, can perfect the sinner to make his actions meritorious of salvation¹². The dispensation of that grace and that perfection was thought to be through the sacraments, only given by the Roman Catholic Church, the means by which one could obtain the necessary grace for salvation. The conflict that led to the Reformation surrounding this particular *sola*, was not a debate over the necessity of grace, then, but that of grace *alone*.

God's grace finds its fullness in the person and work of Jesus Christ in the incarnation – for our status is too dire, our efforts only futile, to merit any salvation on our own. Our lives could only be redeemed from the pit by a substitute, a perfectly holy substitute. There was no sin in him (1 Peter 2:22); he achieved the righteousness that God requires and that righteousness was imputed to his people (Rom. 5). This was God's plan all along (Gal. 4:4-7), because he is a God of grace. Romans 8 and 9, in conjunction with the rest of the New Testament corpus, remind us that our salvation by grace alone is revealed to us so that we might not boast in ourselves, but boast in Christ alone. When Paul reminds us in Romans 9 that God will “be gracious to whom I will be gracious” he quotes Exodus 33, reminding the Christians in Rome that their salvation is an act of God's grace alone, the same redemptive character revealed that has been present amongst God's people since their foundation. Just as God showed his gracious character by rescuing the Israelites from Egypt, he shows his gracious character by sending his Son to die in the place of sinners. “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). Christ's work is fully sufficient for paying the debt made by sin, and by his sacrifice those who trust in him are seen as fully righteous in his sight, not partially righteous, as if Christ would pick us up and set us on our feet so that we could self-sufficiently cross the finish line; it is an act of grace that saves, and grace alone. It's an action that has always been a part of God's plan: it is both who he is and what he has done, because he has chosen us in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4).

Not only does the cross show God's grace to the believer, but also he has ascended into the most holy place to intercede on behalf of God's people (Heb. 9:24). This is intentional temple language again, making clear that in God's grace is a desire to be near his people despite their sin, but also showing that in this act sin will be dealt with – Jesus bearing the punishment himself for us. He is priest and sacrifice, graciously advocating for those whom the Father has called to himself; we have no voice in the matter, Christ speaks for us, and who better to have on your side.

¹¹ Trueman, 44.

¹² VanHoozer, Kevin. *Biblical Authority After Babel*, 46.

Now the mediatorial presence of Christ is expressed through the church, for we are not just called “Christians” as Augustine reminds, but “Christ”¹³: he is the head, we are the body (1 Cor. 12:27). Our union with Christ, again by God’s gracious action, makes it possible that God, who desires to be present amongst his people, would now be present through his church. This is an act of the grace of God, and as we were once “not a people, but now are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, now you have received God’s mercy” (1 Pet. 2:10). The creation of the church is part of the economy of grace, part of God’s redemptive actions¹⁴. God’s grace saves us, but also then equips us for service in the church¹⁵. It is not because of our stellar organizational skills or even ability to muster faith of ourselves that makes us the church, but rather that he has brought us together as an act of sheer grace. We are not to forget that not only are we celebrants of the highest order because we know what it is to have received the amazing grace of God in forgiveness, but we also have an incomparable power in the Holy Spirit at work in his church. As Calvin’s *Institutes* remind us, “to the Father is attributed the beginning of activity – to the Son, the ordered disposition of all things; but to the Spirit is assigned the power and efficacy of that activity¹⁶.” No program or conference will suffice to give us what we need in the church: God is here, and he is our guiding light. It is integral that we too, remember, that God’s grace is not just about soteriology, but grace is the very definition of who God is. His graciousness is the active pouring out of his attributes towards his creation¹⁷ and towards helpless sinners.

Where do we go from here? To be debated regarding this topic are questions like: How does this reality of our total depravity and thus God’s amazing salvation by grace alone affect our preaching? How does this doctrine affect our evangelism? We can approach the throne of grace with confidence (Heb. 4:16). We can preach with confidence, then, the finished work of Christ, and the ever-present reality of Christ in his church. Let us always, like Augustine, be overwhelmed by his grace. This affects how we speak of Christ and how we speak of sin. If we are saved by grace *alone*, then any sinner is welcome; he need only bring his sin. It can be tempting to adopt marketing practices that bring the largest numbers or to offer a pragmatic gospel to help folks live a better life. We do that, in a sense, but only through bringing image-bearers into an encounter with our gracious God who graciously has united us to him, he the head, the church: his body. And then our worship can be centered around his gracious presence amongst us, instead of on our own activity, or our instinct to “do” church; instead all our action is centered around the very real risen Lord and his desire to continue to pour out his grace in the world through his church.

¹³ Augustine, *Confessions*. Ch. II, 4.

¹⁴ Trueman, 160.

¹⁵ Clowney, Edmund P. *The Church*, 62.

¹⁶ Calvin, John. *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.13.18

¹⁷ His action of creating and sustaining mankind before the Fall is also part of his gracious activity.

