

The Reformation and the Gospel of Grace

On October 31, 1517, A Roman Catholic monk named Martin Luther publicly posted his objections to the doctrines of his church. Essentially, Luther had re-discovered the free grace of God obscured through the centuries by man's natural aversion to grace. He renewed the emphasis on the grace of the gospel that Jesus embodied and the apostle Paul defended. This renewed emphasis gave birth to Protestantism and the world has never been the same. Now, 500 years later, how is the Protestant church treating the gospel of grace?

The Reformation *Solas*

Luther's discovery of grace did not occur in isolation from other emphases of the Reformation. He and the other Reformers upheld three intertwined truths commonly known as *Sola Scriptura*, *Sola Gratia*, and *Sola Fide* (two others, *Solas Christus*—Christ alone, and *Soli Deo Gloria*—for God's glory alone, were articulated later). *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone) describes the Reformers' commitment to the Scriptures as the final authority for doctrine and practice. This ran counter to the Catholic commitment to the authority of church traditions and papal pronouncements. Free from the bonds of tradition and allowing the Bible to interpret itself, the Reformers' rediscovery of God's free grace was inevitable. Likewise, *Sola Fide* (through faith alone) was a consequence of understanding that the Bible taught that grace could not be merited by works or human performance. Salvation by grace is God's gift; man's only response is to accept it, that is, believe God for it. Thus, we are justified before God through faith alone. In Catholic doctrine, grace that is infused at baptism leads to good works and sacramental practices that merit more grace until final salvation is achieved. *Sola Gratia* (by grace alone) returned the church to the truth that grace was absolutely free and unconditional. Therefore works do not play any part in meriting salvation: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works lest anyone should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). A person could therefore be declared righteous at the moment of faith in Christ, instead of only beginning a process of becoming righteous. God's righteousness is imputed immediately, not infused over a lifetime.

Protestant Divergences

As much as the original Reformers attempted to explain and refine their theology, there was never total agreement on some issues. Some chief differences concerned the free will of man, the role of works after salvation, and assurance of salvation. Protestants after the Reformation began to form theological views that drifted from the Reformers and their understanding of grace and faith.

Some taught that grace demanded unilateral action by God and did not depend on man at all (monergism) to the point that God's grace provided Jesus Christ as a propitiation for the sins of the elect only, and this grace forced itself irresistibly upon the elect to regenerate them so that they will believe. Faith cannot originate from man alone, because that would be a work and detract from God's glory. This view evolved into what is called High Calvinism, Five-point Calvinism, or TULIP Calvinism. Assurance of salvation depends on the evidence of grace-created works in the believer, which must persist until the final moments of life in order to prove that salvation is genuine. Full assurance is therefore impossible in this life.

Contra the monergistic view of salvation, others maintained that God saves us in a synergism; a congruence of God's will and man's will operating together. In his fall, man did not lose the image of God, however marred it was. Man retains his divinely bestowed free will, however misdirected by sin it is, so God must draw that man by various means to a point where he can believe or reject the gospel (see GraceNotes no. 75).

Faith is not seen as a meritorious work, but a humble reception of God's offer of salvation provided by His grace. This view evolved into what is sometimes called the semi-Pelagian or the more extreme Arminian position. Arminians are ultimately identified as those who believe that a believer's free will can allow him to sin so severely or reject salvation after it is received so that he loses salvation. Arminians claim to have full assurance of salvation if they are living faithfully, but cannot claim assurance about their future salvation because the possibility exists that they could fall away or sin severely enough to lose salvation.

Where does that leave the gospel of grace today?

As uncovered in the Reformation, the biblical teaching of the absolutely free and unconditional grace of God is the essential cornerstone of any true theology of salvation. The Bible says that grace cannot mix at all with works lest it cease to be grace (Rom. 11:6). The Bible also clearly distinguishes faith from works (Rom. 4:4-5).

The TULIP Calvinists have misled many down a path that compromises the free grace of God by requiring obedient faith and evident works as proof of saving grace. These works must be demonstrated over a lifetime and until the end of life. While they declare that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone, they also insist that faith is never alone—it always includes evident works making works necessary for salvation. Those who understand God's regenerating work and the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit agree that genuine faith will result in works. But those works cannot be proof or assurance of salvation because they cannot be measured, are relative, and cannot always be observed. The objective proof and assurance of salvation comes from God's promise of eternal life through Christ and the fact that a person believes in Christ according to that promise.

Likewise, the Arminians have misled many away from the free grace of God by insisting that good works are necessary to keep salvation and that sin and unbelief can forfeit salvation. So grace is conditioned on one's faithfulness. Assurance of salvation is available only to those who are living faithfully in the present time, but there is no assurance of final salvation. We are saved by grace through faith, but remain saved by our faithful performance. Again, works nullify the free grace of God, and salvation is only certain if one dies in faith and faithfulness.

Conclusion

Though the Protestant Reformation rediscovered the biblical truth of God's free grace and salvation through faith alone in Christ alone, the cycles of history and man's aversion to grace have once more obscured the truth of the gospel of grace so that today it is often distorted or perverted. In large groups of Protestantism, man-made theological systems supersede the authority of Scripture alone. Creeds and theologians are commonly quoted before Scripture. Their theology teaches that faith is not faith unless it includes works, which has led to the appearance of many books and articles that insist salvation requires works. Thus, grace is no longer unconditional, but conditioned on the performance of man. In spite of the Reformation revival of the gospel of grace, much of Protestantism today is working its way back to Rome with a gospel that makes works necessary and justification a process. The arc of history and theology shows that it is time to reassert the Reformation's creed of *Sola Scriptura*, *Sola Gratia*, and *Sola Fide*.