

The Five Solas of the Reformation

Sola Gratia - Part 3

July 26, 1998

- **Outline**
- Sola Scriptura
- Solus Christus
- **Sola Gratia**
- Sola Fide
- Soli Deo Gloria
- **Historical Background**

We have considered two essential truths for the Christian faith; the supremacy of the Scriptures with regard to faith and practice and the central figure of those Scriptures being Jesus Christ. In this next section we will address another fundamental tenet of Christianity, the utter dependency we have upon the grace of God. That there is even such a thing for us to depend on unfortunately escapes us and for many modern Evangelical Christians, a proper understanding of grace is far from them. With regard to the Reformation however, Sola Gratia was in no way a new concept.

The debate over our dependence upon the grace of God probably had it's most significant participants in Augustine and Pelagius in the late fourth century. Augustine was a Bishop in northern Africa in a place called Hippo Regius whose writings are one of the most treasured in Christendom today. He was a prolific writer and his most widely recognized work was his work called "Confessions".

Pelagius was a monk who during the sack of Rome by the Visigoths fled to northern Africa where he encountered Augustine. For years deemed orthodox it wasn't until a number of years later that his heresy became widely known. Pelagius' teaching included a denial of original sin, predestination and strong support of man's free will and his innate ability to do good. Augustine and Jerome debated Pelagius and in 416 two different councils excommunicated Pelagius.

The point of this background is to show that the debate over the free will of man and our dependence upon the grace of God in no way originated in the Reformation. However, the gains that were secured by Augustine had all but been lost by the sixteenth century when another legendary debate occurred between the theology of John Calvin and Jacobus Arminius. Although Calvin had been dead for many years, Arminius hated the teachings on the sovereignty of God and set out to respond to Calvin's teaching about free will and election. In 1618, 54 years after the death of Calvin and 9 years after the death of Arminius, at the Synod of Dort, a five point response to the five point position of Arminius was adopted and has subsequently been referred to as the five points of Calvinism. But at the heart of this issue is really the old debate against Pelagianism, or even the more moderate position of semi-pelagianism.

Semi-Pelagianism, although a more recent term, was a variant of the staunch position of Pelagius which many followers adopted years after his death. It still emphasized the free will of man, denied the particular predestination of individuals and believed that God's grace was central in providing Christ as an atonement for sin, but depended upon the man to exercise his free will to possess salvation. This was largely the position of the Catholic church but even it had been muddled to the point where the grace of God and our free will work together to bring about our salvation.

- **A Biblical Defense of Sola Gratia**
- **The Total Depravity of Man**

Before we can understand the grace of God, we must understand the situation which makes His grace necessary. In Adam, all of the human race has been included in his fall. Not only did we inherit a nature which is in bondage to sin from Adam, we ourselves were born in sin. Therefore at birth we were enemies of God and lovers of that which was evil.

Old Testament: New Testament:

1 Kings 8:46 Matthew 15:19

Job 14:1-4 Romans 3:10-12

Proverbs 20:9 Romans 8:7-8

Jeremiah 13:23 1 Corinthians 2:13

Jeremiah 17:9 Ephesians 4:17-24

- **The Essential Grace of God**

In the scriptures we see different kinds of grace being deployed. Whether is it God's gracious provision of rain or food or whether it is His grace which makes us sufficient for a task or duty, these are all manifestations of our gracious God. But for this discussion we will be considering the grace of God which brings salvation (Titus 2:11-15).

The reason why the Gospel is such good news is because it resolves that which is such bad news. We are not only born in sin we continue in it each day; if we say that we have not sinned then we deceive only ourselves and we are liars (1 John 1:8). The first thing we must come to understand is the definition of the word grace. Grace is commonly defined as unmerited favor but we must go much further than this. By definition, grace must be antithetical to works. (Romans 11:1-7) Grace is also antithetical to fairness or justice. (Romans 6:20-23) By definition, grace must be completely free from works otherwise grace is no longer grace.

In Romans 5:12-21 we again see the condition of man but we see the conquering grace of God abounding much more than the prevalent sin of man.

- **Our Righteous God: The Just and The Justifier**

The next logical point that might come up for consideration is on what basis can a lawful God deploy this grace? If we are all sinners such that we were born in sin as well as steeped in our own sin, how can a righteous and just God not impose the sanctions of the law upon us? It is plain to see that all of us deserve condemnation and eternal punishment so it is easy to see how a righteous God could pour out His wrath upon sinners. How could a righteous God possibly allow anyone in to heaven? The answer begins in Romans 3:21-26 where we see our righteous God declare that He must be just and the one who justifies. Remember that justification is a legal term which means that one who is guilty is declared no longer guilty.

But again, how can a righteous God be both the giver of a perfect law and be a just God and not convict those who offend? The glorious answer to this can be found in Romans 8:1-8 where we see that God did not set aside the law nor did He diminish our sin. Instead He fulfilled the righteous requirement of His righteous law by making His son to be our sin by imputing our sin to Jesus on the cross (Galatians 3:13).

- **Our Righteous God: The Glorifier**

The grace of God upon which we entirely depend upon God for our eternal security has clearly justified us and continues to sanctify us by conforming us to the image of His Son. But this same grace has also glorified those whom it has saved and this glorification is the adoption as sons. When once we were enemies of God and yet still sinners, God sent His Son to efficaciously secure the salvation of the Elect, the Church. But this grace did not end at justification, rather it went even further and glorified us to the point of adoption as sons with a guaranteed inheritance and the right to call Him Father as does our Elder Brother Jesus. We are taken from a position of being by nature an object of wrath to a position of sonship and an eternal inheritance.

Next week we will examine the proper role of works and the faith by which this grace is imputed.