THE **5 SOLAS** SERIES

Grace ALONE

SALVATION AS A GIFT OF GOD

What the Reformers Taught . . . and Why It Still Matters

CARL R. TRUEMAN

MATTHEW BARRETT, SERIES EDITOR

Trueman takes complex biblical and theological ideas and makes them easy to understand. The key message is that God's grace, healing our sinful neediness, is at the heart of true biblical piety. Trueman develops this theme with relation to the church, preaching, sacraments, and prayer. As a Catholic, I resonated deeply with Trueman's portrait of biblical piety, and I found much else to treasure—including his emphasis on the priority of God's action and his stirring account of the ministry of preaching. This is a book that will instruct everyone who loves the gracious Lord Jesus Christ.

MATTHEW LEVERING, James N. and Mary D. Perry Jr. Chair of Theology, Mundelein Seminary

Grace is a word so common in our day and age as to border on the cliché. Yet prizing the gospel means treasuring grace. Carl Trueman does us all the service, then, of helping to make connections that are crucial: between grace and the active presence of the triune God, between the promises of the Old Testament and the intervention recounted in the New, between the ancient faith of the early fathers and later Protestant reforms, and between a rich theology of grace and its necessary implications for piety and worship. This book brings remarkable biblical, historical, and pastoral perspective to an oftentimes ambiguous but genuinely amazing reality.

MICHAEL ALLEN, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, Florida

This is an outstanding book on an extraordinary subject. It clearly explains the biblical foundations of grace and navigates the historical debates in a way that is both highly engaging and deeply informed. Perhaps even more importantly, the practical applications of grace—both for individuals and for churches—are sharply driven home. I am grateful this book was written, and I highly commend it to any and all who are interested in learning more about the matchless grace of the triune God.

JONATHAN L. MASTER, Professor of Theology and Dean of the School of Divinity, Cairn University

Trueman, a master of the art of making historical texts of the Christian tradition relevant and applicable for use in our time, effectively presents the ways in which Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin put the foundational biblical concept of grace to work in their day. This serves him well as a basis for a lively exploration of how God's grace functions in the church today through the proclaimed Word of God, the sacraments, and believers' prayer. This volume demonstrates how grace, as the lively disposition of God in Christ, frames God's dealing with a sinful world as Trueman confesses its significance for the twenty-first century.

ROBERT KOLB, Professor of Systematic Theology emeritus, Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis

Where is grace? What is grace? Who is grace? And how is it conferred to us? I resonate with Trueman's lament that grace has become an empty sentiment in much of contemporary Christian literature. What does the Reformation cry "grace alone" really mean? And why is it so important today? To answer these questions, Trueman gives us both a history and a theology of grace. He shows the reader that grace is confrontational, that one can't have a proper understanding of grace without a

proper understanding of sin. Read this book to learn what a grace-alone church takes seriously.

AIMEE BYRD, author of *No Little Women*, *Theological Fitness*, and *Housewife Theologian*; Director of Women's Initiatives at The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, and cohost on Mortification of Spin podcast.

Carl Trueman is always worth reading. I am especially eager to recommend this excellent volume on the Protestant battle cry "grace alone." It is obvious that it comes from one who is both a scholar and a churchman. It at once challenges the mind and warms the heart with the grand theme of God's gracious salvation. This is a book to be savored.

TODD PRUITT, pastor, Covenant Presbyterian Church, Harrisonburg, Virginia

Grace

ALONE

SALVATION AS A GIFT OF GOD

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Grace ALONE

SALVATION AS A GIFT OF GOD

What the Reformers Taught
. . . and Why It Still Matters

CARL R. TRUEMAN
MATTHEW BARRETT, SERIES EDITOR
FOREWORD BY R. KENT HUGHES

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For Mark, Jen, and Alicia

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A Note from the Series Editor

What doctrines could be more foundational to what it means to be an evangelical Protestant than the five *solas* (or *solae*) of the Reformation? In my experience, however, many in evangelical churches today have never heard of *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone), *sola gratia* (grace alone), *sola fide* (faith alone), *solus Christus* (Christ alone), and *soli Deo gloria* (glory to God alone).

Now it could be that they have never heard the labels but would recognize the doctrines once told what each *sola* means. At least I pray so. But my suspicion is that for many churchgoers, even the content of these five *solas* is foreign, or worse, offensive. We live in a day when Scripture's authority is questioned, the exclusivity of Christ as mediator as well as the necessity of saving faith are offensive to pluralistic ears, and the glory of God in vocation is diminished by cultural accommodation as well as by individual and ecclesiastical narcissism. The temptation is to think that these five *solas* are museum pieces of a bygone era with little relevance for today's church. We disagree. We need these *solas* just as much today as the Reformers needed them in the sixteenth century.

The year 2017 will mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. These five volumes, written by some of the best theologians today, celebrate that anniversary. Our aim is not merely to look to the past but to the present, demonstrating that we must drink deeply from the wells of the five *solas* in order to recover our theological bearings and find spiritual refreshment.

Post tenebras lux

Matthew Barrett, series editor

Foreword

Carl Trueman has given us a rich, variegated exposition of the second *sola* of the Reformation, *sola gratia*, which is uniquely captivating and, as such, will leave the reader with a deepened and enduring understanding of grace that will not be easily forgotten or effaced. The reasons for this are several.

First, Dr. Trueman's exposition of key biblical texts clears away the haze of sentimental abstractions that cloud much of the present day understanding of the doctrine of grace. Trueman does this by firmly grounding the doctrine in the blood-drenched soil of both Testaments as he first expounds *God's* unilateral actions in the Genesis narrative beginning with the fall—when God clothed Adam and Eve with the raw, bloodied hides of animals that he had slain to cover the sinful couple. He shows that this primeval precedent appeared again in the heart of patriarchal history in the Abrahamic covenant when God himself elected to pass between the bloody, flayed sacrifices, indicating the covenant's divinely gracious, unconditional nature. In concert with this, the sacrificial system later instituted at Sinai was wholly the result of divine grace. God took the initiative to reach down to man to create, establish, and regulate the sacrificial system to graciously serve and satisfy his justice. The roots of the system in primeval and patriarchal history are evident in the sacrifices being raw and bloody affairs. And, in Trueman's evocative words, the theological lesson from the Old Testament is this: "Sin is violent lethal rebellion against God; and biblical grace is God's violent, raw, and bloody response."

This places the New Testament's account of the blood-drenched cross of Christ as the towering center of redemptive history, as the supreme action of God, and as the crowning manifestation of his costly grace. Grace cannot be imagined (much less referenced) apart from Christ. This lays to rest the sentimental notion that grace is a benign overlooking of sin or an impersonal mechanistic process.

The second reason that this book will enlarge the reader's understanding and appropriation of grace is Trueman's enthralling theological tour of how grace came to be understood and appropriated over the centuries, beginning with Augustine's *Confessions* and concluding with Calvin's *Institutes*. The tour includes: a) Augustine's seismic conversion, his experience of overwhelming grace, and his understanding that *God* had converted him, which then drew the fire of Pelagius and providentially occasioned Augustine's *Anti-Pelagian Writings*, in which he crafted the exegetical and theological grounds of the doctrine of grace; b) the medieval contribution of Thomas Aquinas, who through the use of Aristotelian logic formulated an enriched scriptural understanding of grace (undergirded by the doctrine of predestination) that is in profound continuity with the theology of Augustine; c) the theological development of Martin Luther midst the arcane currents of his late medieval environment and his mature understanding of justification by grace through faith, wherein the act of faith must, necessarily, be an act of sovereign grace; d) though Luther firmly held to predestination, divisions among the Lutherans over the doctrine meant that theological reflection passed to the Reformed and became identified with John Calvin, who though he offered no innovations, adorned it with clarity,

maintaining that election, predestination, and grace must only be contemplated *in Christ*.

R. Kent Hughes

Senior Pastor Emeritus, College Church, Wheaton, Illinois

Acknowledgments

It is a delight to thank those who have helped to make this book possible. Matthew Barrett, for commissioning it for his series on the five *solas*. It is an honor to be included alongside Tom Schreiner, David VanDrunen, Stephen Wellum, and Matthew—men whose work I admire and have profited from greatly over the years.

I would also like to thank Ryan Pazdur and the staff at Zondervan for their patience with missed deadlines and then the care with which they edited the manuscript and brought it to the requisite standard for publication. Special thanks are also due to Matthew and Ryan, as well as Michael Wittmer of Cornerstone University, for extremely helpful comments on my first draft. I wish also to thank my friend Matthew Levering of Mundelein Seminary for kindly reading and offering important comments on the Aquinas chapter.

Last, I want to thank my wife, Catriona, for her perennial encouragement, and my two sons, John and Peter, though now gone from home, for being such supports over the years.

Carl R. Trueman

Oreland, Pennsylvania

December 2015

Abbreviations

APW	*Saint Augustine: Anti-Pelagian Writings*. Edited by P. Schaff. New York: Christian Literature Company, 1887.
LW	*Luther's Works*. 82 vols. projected. St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955–86; 2009–.
ST	Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*

Introduction

The language of grace so permeates the Bible and all traditions of Christian theology that to claim that salvation is by grace alone is, in itself, to claim very little at all. It does not distinguish Augustine from Pelagius, Thomas Aquinas from Gabriel Biel, Martin Luther from Desiderius Erasmus, or William Perkins from James Arminius. What distinguishes them is how grace is understood. There is therefore a need for definition, lest grace become merely an empty piece of theological rhetoric. Indeed, unlike "faith alone," "grace alone" as a simple phrase is unlikely to provoke much controversy among anyone who claims the name Christian.[1]

This became apparent to me while watching the news program *Morning Joe* a few years ago. One of the guests that day was a well-known pastor in the Presbyterian Church in America, who was being interviewed about his new book on grace. This pastor spent around eight minutes talking about grace but never actually defined what it is and, crucially, never mentioned the name of Jesus Christ. Those lacking a theological background would have come away with the impression that grace was simply a divine sentiment, a decision or a tendency in God to overlook sin as an overindulgent parent might when dealing with a naughty child. Grace seemed to be nothing more than God turning a blind eye to human rebellion. It was as if grace were a free pass to do whatever one chooses.

As we shall see from looking at what the Bible teaches about grace and looking at how the greatest theologians of the Christian tradition have articulated it, grace is far more than a mere attitude or sentiment in God. God does not turn a blind eye to human rebellion. In fact, he tackles it head-on in the person and work of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible constantly connects grace to Christ, and the best theologians of the Christian faith have always made this connection central to their understanding and articulation of grace. To talk about grace is to talk about Christ. The pastor I listened to in that interview may have used the word "grace" several times, but the absence of any reference to Christ should be a clue that he was not talking about the biblical concept.

In this work, part of a series on the five *solas* of the Reformation, I will explore the notion of grace with an overview of grace as it is found in the Bible. Then, we will spend a significant time looking at grace as it has been articulated throughout church history, finishing with the Reformation. I've chosen to end the historical discussion with the Reformation not because I regard the Reformation as some peculiarly pristine golden age or as the zenith of church life. I do this because I believe the basic patterns of Protestant and evangelical understandings of grace are sufficiently developed in the Reformation to allow us to draw lessons for the present day.

In the first part of the book, we look at the biblical understanding of grace and the historical development of grace from Augustine through the Reformation.

Chapter 1 gets us started with an overview of the biblical references to, and teaching on, grace. It provides a brief but necessary grounding in the biblical understanding of grace. Grace is constituted by God's action, supremely God's action in Christ.

Chapters 2 and 3 begin our look at the historical understandings of grace, starting with Augustine. We look at his masterpiece, the *Confessions*, a work of reflective autobiography that contains what we might characterize as an intuitive understanding of sin and grace. It has proved to be a profoundly influential work, not only in Christian circles but also in the genre of psychological autobiography and the understanding of the self. In this volume we look at it in relation to Augustine's view of sin and grace, and the controversy this triggered with the Welsh monk Pelagius and his followers. The Pelagian controversy, as it is now known, offered Augustine the opportunity to sharpen and elaborate his views of grace and to do so in a way that was to have unparalleled influence in the West. As Benjamin Warfield later claimed, the Reformation was the triumph of Augustine's view of grace over his view of the church.

Chapter 4 is a look at the thought of Thomas Aquinas. While Aquinas's thinking on grace was vast and complex, embracing his view of the sacraments, our focus here is on his general view of grace. Aquinas understood grace as that which brings the creature to glory, an end beyond the one for which he is fitted by mere nature and beyond his ability as a fallen creature. Aquinas is alien territory for many Protestants, but his understanding of grace is helpful, demonstrating that Augustinian understandings of God's sovereignty were alive and well in the Middle Ages.

Chapters 5 and 6 address the time of the Reformation, and I pay particular attention to the clash between Luther and Erasmus on the bondage of the will and the views of Calvin, Heinrich Bullinger, and the Reformed confessions on predestination. Crucial to the Reformation is the way in which Augustinian views of grace and predestination were picked up by the Reformers to serve a new purpose: the assurance of salvation. This was, perhaps, the Reformation's single most important experiential insight into the Christian faith. Chapter 6 also addresses the dissolution of the anti-Pelagian tradition of Protestantism with the arrival of Arminianism.

The second half of the book looks at grace and the church. Chapters 7 through 10 are devoted to the practical implications of a Reformation understanding of grace: the church and then the means of grace. Chapter 7 looks at the church as something God does, the new creation, an act of God's grace toward us and not (as we often instinctively think of it) the response of human beings to God. Chapter 8 deals with the word preached as God's means of accomplishing his purposes. Chapter 9 makes a case for taking the sacraments more seriously. And chapter 10 explains why prayer is also to be considered a means of God's grace. The conclusion wraps things up, drawing some practical lessons from what we've learned throughout the book.

Grace is the heart of the Christian gospel. It is a doctrine that touches the very depths of human existence because it not only reveals to us the very heart of God but draws us back into that precious communion with him that was so tragically lost at the fall. It is my hope that this little book will help guide you not only into a better doctrinal understanding of the issue but also give you a more glorious vision of the God whom you worship.

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1. For a treatment of *sola fide*, see Thomas R. Schreiner, *Faith Alone—The Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015).

PART 1

Sola Gratia in Scripture and History

CHAPTER 1
Grace in the Bible

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people.

Titus 2:11

I am by calling a professor of church history and the pastor of a local church. Thus, the bulk of this book will play to what are, if not my strengths, at least the areas in which I am probably most competent: history and ecclesiology. Yet even as the subject of the book, *grace alone*, points us inevitably to matters of history and practice, above all it points us to the Scriptures. And that is appropriate. I write as a Protestant, an heir of the Reformation, and thus as one committed not simply to the principle of grace alone but also to *Scripture alone*.[1] All theology must therefore be normed or regulated by the teaching of Scripture. Thus, while the historical heroes of the tale I tell are Augustine, Aquinas, and the Reformers, they were motivated by the desire to understand and to proclaim what God had taught about grace in the inspired words of his Scriptures. For this reason, it is important to start our study by addressing the issue of the Bible's own teaching about grace.

A search for the word "grace" and its cognates in the English Standard Version yields over 150 occurrences throughout the Old and New Testaments, with the vast majority in the latter. Indeed, "grace" as a specific term is a relatively rare occurrence in the Old Testament. And yet we should not allow ourselves to be misled by such a crude approach into concluding that the concept of grace does not pervade the whole of the Bible from beginning to end. A search for the term "Trinity" reveals no occurrence of the word at all, yet no orthodox Christian would deny that the concept is a vital part of the Bible's teaching. Thus it is with grace: grace permeates Scripture as one of the most important teachings about God and his relationship to his creation.

In fact, as we start to look at Scripture's teaching on grace, we might characterize it at the start by saying that it has a twofold theological significance in the Bible. First, it most typically means the unmerited favor of God. Perhaps we might, with all due reverence, say that in this way grace speaks of God's attitude toward his creation and toward his people. When thinking of grace in this sense, Reformed theologians have made a further distinction between common grace, referring to God's unmerited but nonsalvific favor toward the fallen creation that restrains evil and allows human beings to flourish in this earthly realm, and special grace, referring to God's unmerited salvific favor exhibited in and through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Second, grace can mean the active outworking of God's unmerited favor in the life of the church

and of the believer. Here the language of grace refers to the work of God in those to whom he has an attitude of saving favor. He does not just save us from our sins, but he also matures us in the faith and uses us to bring glory to his name even while here on earth. Yet this too is ultimately the gracious work of God. Thus, these two meanings are intimately connected: it is because we are saved by grace that grace then works in our lives to accomplish God's purposes for us. The Christian life originates in God's grace and is lived by God's grace. And this is true of both Old and New Testaments.[2]

Grace in the Old Testament

In English translations of the Old Testament, while the noun "grace" is rare, the adjective "gracious" is more common.[3] This is because God's grace is not an attribute of God's nature in the way that, say, omnipotence or omniscience are such. Grace is intimately connected to the fact that human beings are fallen and thus deserve the wrath and judgment of God. Grace, we might say, is a response, an application of God's character and attributes, to human rebellion. Grace is that aspect of divine action by which God blesses his rebellious creatures, whether through preservation (common grace) or salvation (special grace). It characterizes the manner in which he deals with those who through their rejection of him as their Creator and sovereign deserve nothing from him and yet whom he still chooses to bless. In salvation in particular the character of grace is manifest. A loving God, faced with the rebellion of his creatures, desires to bring them back into communion with himself. Yet his holiness cannot simply allow their sin to pass without response, for if God allows our unholy rejection of him to stand, he is contradicting his own holy nature. The answer is grace: action on God's part, motivated by love and shaped by holiness, which takes account of the seriousness of sin yet brings sinners back into communion with him.

In short, if the world did not exist and had never fallen, God could not be said to be gracious. An older generation of theologians would have referred to this as a relational attribute of God, one that only exists in relation to something other than God. It describes an active disposition toward that other thing.

When the Lord passes before Moses at Sinai in Exodus 34:6–7, he proclaims himself to be gracious:

> The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and the fourth generation.

Here the Lord describes himself as gracious and merciful, two ways of saying essentially the same thing. But notice the reason he declares this. In the face of human sin and rebellion, the Lord has chosen not to exact justice, as he is entitled to do. He has chosen instead to be gracious and merciful. In other words, he has decided to show unmerited favor toward those who do not deserve it, and in his words to Moses he reminds his people of that very fact. The gracious disposition of God lies at the heart of the many biblical benedictions that have been pronounced over God's people throughout the years.[4]

God's merciful grace to his people pervades the Old Testament narrative, from the moment he allows Adam and Eve to live after they have sinned, through his loving preservation of his people Israel in the face of their frequent grumblings and rebellions, up to the coming of the Christ. Grace also provides the background to one of the most famous examples of prophetic petulance. When Jonah goes reluctantly to Nineveh to call the Ninevites to repentance and the Lord consequently spares the city and its inhabitants, Jonah is furious. The ground of his complaint is ironic: he claims that he knew that the Lord would do this because he understood, echoing Exodus 34:6, that God was a gracious God (Jonah 4:2). It's ironic because it was only the fact of God's graciousness that meant Jonah himself could enjoy the relationship with the Lord that he did. What Jonah took for granted he begrudged to others.

The story of Jonah is a very human one. As the great cynic Gore Vidal once said, every time he heard of the success of a friend, a little piece of him died. Vidal touches on something very true: there is a part of us as sinful human beings that hates the success of others; and to see the grace of God so gloriously displayed in the lives of the Ninevites was more than Jonah could bear. Yet Jonah's reaction is only so ugly because God's grace is so beautiful. An entire city of sleazy, corrupt, vile human beings is yet delivered from judgment and brought into joyful communion with God. The story is not so much about Jonah's bitterness of soul as it is about God's glorious grace.

Grace and Covenant

At the heart of the Old Testament teaching on God's grace is God's covenant with his people. The covenant provides the historical revelation, thread, and structure to God's gracious dealings. The Abrahamic covenant ceremony described in Genesis 15 is both conventional and highly unusual. On the one hand, it was typical for ancient Near Eastern covenants to be ratified by the cutting in two of sacrificial animals, between which the covenanting parties would pass as a way of saying, "If we break the terms of the covenant, may we be torn in two as these creatures have been!" Yet in Genesis 15, Abram does not pass between the carcasses; only the Lord does this. In taking this action, the Lord unconditionally and unilaterally pledges himself to Abram and his descendants. As we see in the New Testament, this action prefigures the work of God in Christ on the cross at Calvary, where he takes up the penalty for our sins in the fulfillment of the covenant.

The covenant becomes the key to the administration of God's grace at several important moments in Israel's history. In 2 Kings 13, we read of how Hazael, king of Syria (whom the Lord had raised up to discipline his own people, 1 Kgs 19:15–17), had been oppressing the kingdom of Israel. We are told that the Lord decided to be gracious toward his people and to preserve them "because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" (v. 23). In other words, the basis for God's gracious dealings with his people in the midst of their continual sin and rebellion was the covenant promises he had made to the patriarchs. Righteous kings such as Hezekiah realized this, and in 2 Chronicles 30 we see him citing God's gracious covenant when he called the nation to repentance. The Jews were conscious of their covenant history with God and deeply aware that these promises formed the basis of their gracious standing before him.

Given the importance of the covenant in God's gracious dealings with his people, the narrative of God's grace toward them was vital to Israel's identity. It shaped what we might call the liturgical life of the nation, both in the stories that it told about itself in the home and in the great declarations that it

made in public before the nation and before the world. In Exodus 12 Moses points the people toward a time when their descendants will have no firsthand memory of the events of the exodus and no immediate understanding of the meaning of the Passover meal. In this context, he instructs them to recite and retell the story of God's great rescue of his people from Egypt. When a new generation asks, "Who are we?" the answer is clear: "We are God's special people whom he graciously rescued from slavery in Egypt." God's grace forms the foundation of their national identity. They are a people formed by grace and sustained by grace.

Grace, Confession, and Benediction

We also see this when we look at the foundational Jewish confession of faith in the Old Testament, the Shema of Deuteronomy 6. In reciting the words of the Shema, the people declare that God is one, followed by the command to love him and a warning not to forget the great and gracious acts of deliverance that the Lord had performed for his people. The identity of God's people is established by their history, and their history is one of God's gracious, unmerited, unilateral saving action toward them. They are, to put it simply, the people of God's grace. Grace is essential to their identity. When they recall who God is, they must necessarily remember what he has done for them. Their identity starts not in their own activities, but in the prior action of God toward them.

Israel is who she is because she is the object of divine grace, and this truth is central to the great blessing that is to be given to the people, the Aaronic benediction of Numbers 6:24–26:

> The LORD bless you
> and keep you;
> the LORD make his face shine on you
> and be gracious to you;
> the LORD turn his face toward you
> and give you peace.

Even today, these words are frequently spoken at the close of worship services in Protestant churches, precisely because they remind the people of who they are—sinners who have received the free favor of God and have been made his people. The benediction points people to the grace of God, by which they approach him. When fallen, sinful creatures come before God, they need to be reminded that God is gracious toward them, that he chooses to bless them not for any merit they possess in themselves but simply because he, the Lord, has chosen to be merciful to them. God does not treat them as their sin and rebellion deserve. God is a God of grace, and his grace defines what it means for them to be the people of God.

The blessing of Numbers 6 was originally given to the Aaronic priesthood, and this ties it closely to the entire sacrificial system of the Old Testament. We should note this because we have a tendency today to reduce grace to a kind of divine sentiment. This reduction of grace cheapens forgiveness. We wrongly believe that apologizing will be sufficient to cover the evil of our sin. But grace is far more than a sentimental notion. Grace is connected to God's being and God's action, especially God's action in Christ. It is therefore costly and not to be treated in a light fashion as if it were something

cheap.[5]

Grace and Sacrifice

In contrast to cheap sentimentalism, God's grace in the Old Testament is more than a whim or a spineless capitulation to human rebellion. God does not ignore the problem of sin and pretend it does not exist. He feels a holy anger and wrath toward sin and cannot simply pardon the rejection of his rule as if it had never happened. So there is need for atoning action to deal with the transgressions of his mandates. Thus, God establishes a sacrificial system under Moses, the supreme manifestation of which is the Day of Atonement, detailed in Leviticus 16, whereby sin might be addressed. God himself creates the sacrificial system, he regulates it via his word and elect priesthood, and ultimately, it is God who chooses to accept the sacrifices presented to him.

This fact—that God is the one who establishes and regulates the sacrificial system—should not be ignored. It's significant because it teaches us that the Old Testament sacrifices were not an attempt by human beings to find something that would placate or cajole an angry God. We wrongly imagine that God was angry with his people and they somehow discovered ways to twist his arm and earn his favor despite their sin. The Scriptures teach us that it was God who took the initiative, revealing how sinful humans could relate to him. He established the content, the terms, and the results of the sacrifices because his wrath needed to be satisfied in a particular way. This initiative is further evidence of his grace and favor toward his people. This is not humanity reaching up to God but God reaching down to humanity, an action completely founded in God's unmerited favor toward his people. He establishes *by grace* the sacrifices which serve to satisfy his justice.

The gracious activity of God does not begin with the sacrificial system instituted under Moses, of course. Hints of this are found even earlier in the Old Testament. We first see God's grace on display when God confronts Adam and Eve in the garden after the fall. Adam and his wife have made themselves clothes out of leaves in an attempt to cover their shame. When God approaches, he does not accept their coverings, yet he does not immediately wipe them from the face of the earth either. Instead, he slays animals and covers Adam and Eve with the skins of the animals so that their sinful nakedness might be covered. God deals with the immediate problem of their guilt in the manner of his own choosing. In other words, he provides the solution to the problem of Adam's sin. In Genesis 3, for all his wrath at Adam's rebellion, he is revealed to be a gracious God who saves his people through animal sacrifice. These themes recur throughout the Scriptures, as we find again in Genesis 22, for example. After God has asked Abraham to sacrifice his only son to the Lord, Abraham makes the portentous statement that God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering (Gen 22:8). Again, we see God revealed as gracious because he provides for his people what they cannot provide for themselves—the sacrifice required for sin. Grace and sacrifice are inextricably linked throughout God's dealings with his Old Testament people.

It is perhaps worth pausing here for a moment and reflecting on the existential implications of the fact that sacrifice is connected to salvation and grace. Sacrifices were raw and bloody affairs. It is often said by opponents of the meat industry that more people would be vegetarians if they had to kill the animals they eat. That is probably true because slaughtering an animal is a dramatic and powerful event, especially when it is done by knife rather than by gun. It involves violence and, quite literally, blood and guts. Imagine the impact on Adam and Eve of being clothed with the raw, bloodied hides of

the animals slain by God to cover them. This would have been quite a contrast to the leaves they had chosen for themselves. The Lord was signaling to them that their actions had catastrophic consequences beyond their wildest nightmares. And imagine being present at a sacrifice and seeing the lifeblood literally pour out of a lamb. It is one thing to understand the cultic and doctrinal significance of sacrifice. It is quite another to witness it firsthand.

Human alienation from God is something that affects us at the deepest level, and it is a problem of catastrophic proportions. The anodyne, coolly objective ways in which we discuss sacrifice in the lecture room, or the transformation of the cross into an item of costume jewelry, are eloquent testimonies to the way we have turned the problem of the human condition and the response of God's grace into ideas that verge on being mere abstractions. The violent nature of sacrifice stands in judgment on the inadequacy of such conceptions and reminds us of the powerful, existential dimension of human rebellion and divine grace. Sin is violent, lethal rebellion against God; and biblical grace is God's violent, raw, and bloody response.

Grace and Prayer

Human beings are sinful and deserve nothing but justice and wrath at the hands of God. Yet as we have seen, God's gracious action is both the response to sin and that which gives Israel its basic identity. So it should not surprise us to find that grace becomes a staple of the piety of the Old Testament. Throughout the Old Testament narratives, Psalms, and in the Prophets, we find God's people crying out to the Lord in their prayers, pleading for him to be gracious.

Prayer is, of course, closely attached to the notion of sacrifice. We must not forget this, for to do so would be to detach prayer from its position in God's overall gracious action and also to lose that powerful, raw, existential aspect that we noted above in regard to the nature of sacrifice. If grace is not empty sentiment, then neither is prayer a sentimental action. How often on news reports do we see examples of human suffering with the response that people are praying for the victims? While the response is in a sense a good one, it is hard not to wonder whether phrases such as "our thoughts and prayers are with the victims" are really just another way of saying "we feel very badly for the victims and want to express our solidarity with them and their loved ones." That is not biblical prayer. Biblical prayer rests on God's grace and thus on God's character as expressed in his saving actions toward his people and as shown forth in the bloody sacrifices of the Old Testament.

This is why the primary place of prayer in the Old Testament is the tabernacle and then the temple, the places where God dwells in covenant with his people and where sacrifices are offered to him. The temple was a house of prayer (Isa 56:7; cf. Matt 21:13). It was also the place where prayers were answered. The existential confusion of the psalmist over the apparent prosperity of the wicked, for example, is resolved when he takes his questions to God's sanctuary (Ps 73:16–17). We can only speculate as to what precisely happened to him in the temple to solve his problem, but it was surely something to do with the sacrificial actions that took place there.

If sacrifice is the context of prayer, then once again we might note that it is the character of God revealed in these sacrifices that is of utmost importance. When Nehemiah (Neh 9) leads the people of Israel in a prayer of corporate confession, he recounts how God has saved them in the past despite their sin and rebellion and ascribes graciousness to him (v. 17), consciously echoing the words God has declared about himself in Exodus 34:6. Nehemiah knows that at this critical moment when Israel

returns to Jerusalem a knowledge of God's grace will be vitally important for the people. They must be taught to remember who they are in light of what God has done for them so they can understand the significance of their actions. Nehemiah does not speak to their immediate needs; he points them back to God's great historic dealings with his people, calling them to recall how God has revealed himself to be merciful and faithful to them in the past. Nehemiah calls both the people and God himself in his prayer, asking God to be the God he has promised to be and reminding the people of who they are. And of course he is engaged in the great project of rebuilding the temple, the very place where the sacrifices that undergird prayer are to be performed.

The existential impact of grace is nowhere more apparent than in the Psalms. When we turn to these, we find them replete with references to God's graciousness as well as explicit calls for him to be gracious. Indeed, the grace of God serves as the foundation for the piety of the psalmist. It is God's grace alone that forms the basis for any salvific engagement with him. In Psalm 4 he calls on God to be gracious by hearing his prayer (v. 1). Psalm 6 asks the Lord to be gracious by not rebuking the psalmist in wrath (v. 1). Psalm 9 calls on the Lord to be gracious by saving him from persecution at the hands of his enemies (v. 13). At times, the suffering of the psalmist leads him to question whether God is still gracious (Ps 77:9), while at other times his confidence overflows with exultant declarations of how gracious God is, echoing other declarations of God's gracious character found in Exodus 34:6 (Pss 103:8; 145:8) or the Aaronic blessing (Ps 67:1). As noted earlier, the covenant is also featured as the grounds for God's graciousness. Prayer typically takes the form of calling out to God and asking him to be the gracious God he has promised to be. The psalmist does not look to his own merit but rather the character of God as he has displayed it in his dealings with his people.

What is clear from a study of prayer in the Psalms is that God's grace, his unmerited mercy in his dealings with his people, is foundational to the relationship between human beings and their Creator. Prayer is not a conversation between equals, nor is it a cooperative exercise between a servant and a king. The piety of the Psalms is decidedly one-sided, rooted in God's character and in God's response to human sin. The psalmist pleads no merit of his own but looks solely to God's grace in making his requests. As we move into the New Testament, we see this grace embodied and definitively revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ, yet even in the piety of the Old Testament we see the people turning to the grace of God. To live in the favor and grace of God has been the perennial longing of the people of God from the very start. The psalmist knows that the only answer to the deepest and most troubling questions of human existence is the grace of God.

In fact, at the heart of biblical piety as established in the Old Testament lies a cry of human desperation. The psalmists recognize that there is hope, but it is only found in God's gracious initiative. They have despaired of themselves and see no hope in a fallen creation. They know that if salvation is to come, it can only come from God himself and can only be rooted in his character and his actions. The reason is simple: human beings are in rebellion against God. The creation groans under the weight of human sin and the disruption in our relationship with our Creator. Human experience is tragic: life is not as it should be and ends in death, the penalty for sin. Death is an unnatural intrusion into the realm of human existence, and hope, if there is any hope, must be in God himself breaking into this creation from outside and acting toward it in mercy.

This is why, even in the darkest of the psalms (Ps 88) where there is no explicit expression of hope at all, the psalmist uses the covenant name of God. Despair is set against the larger background of God's covenant and his grace. The problem of humanity is not lack of self-fulfillment requiring

personal affirmation and assistance. It is that we are rebels against God at the very core of our being and need him to be gracious toward us.

I would note at this point that this understanding is quite different from what we often find today, even among Protestant churches that claim to take the Bible and the Reformation seriously. Under the impact of cultural forces that place the consumer at the center, Christianity has become a means to an end, something that helps us to realize our own goals or potential. It is a kind of self-help therapy dressed up in an orthodox religious idiom. Yet this has nothing in common with biblical piety, a grace-based piety that understands the tragedy of the human condition and knows that only God's unmerited favor can solve the problems of the human condition.

This is further evident in the writings of the Old Testament prophets. Earlier, we noted Jonah's complaint about God's grace, knowing that Nineveh deserved destruction but "worried" that God might prefer mercy to justice. Jonah relished grace for himself but was not eager to share it with others. More positively, Joel speaks of God's grace in calling the people back to repentance (Joel 2:13), as do Amos (Amos 5:15) and Malachi (Mal 1:9). Of all the prophets, however, Isaiah is arguably the greatest prophet of God's grace. Beginning with his own crisis moment in Isaiah 6, when he is confronted by the Lord in his holiness, Isaiah is driven to despair because of his own sin, a despair cured only by God's own merciful and gracious action. This awareness of God's grace carries through his writings, into the magnificent Servant Songs, where Isaiah looks to the grace of God as the ultimate hope for the people's salvation.

Isaiah 53:4–6 famously offers a pointed and powerful statement of this grace:

> Surely he took up our pain
> and bore our suffering,
> yet we considered him punished by God,
> stricken by him, and afflicted.
> But he was pierced for our transgressions,
> he was crushed for our iniquities;
> the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
> and by his wounds we are healed.
> We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
> each of us has turned to our own way;
> and the LORD has laid on him
> the iniquity of us all.

Here we see the culmination of God's gracious action focused on the Servant. Our griefs and our sorrows have been borne by him. Our peace is bought as he is crushed and chastised. Our sins and transgressions have been laid on him by the Lord so that we might not have to bear their consequences ourselves. God is the agent in this work on our behalf. It is not a response to any good actions we have performed. Rather, it is the opposite: this is how God responds to our sinful rebellion. God's graciousness finds fulfillment in the work of the Servant. Here God's unmerited salvific favor is enacted and displayed for all to see. Isaiah's prophecies of the Servant and his gracious activity point

us forward, to the fullness of God's grace revealed in Christ in the New Testament.

Grace in the New Testament

Grace and Jesus Christ

The supreme manifestation of God's grace in history is Jesus Christ. All of the elements of grace we have discussed in the Old Testament—covenant, sacrifice, prayer—find their culmination in the incarnation and life of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. In him God not only breaks into history in human form but also brings to a startling climax his promised purposes for his people.

Numerous New Testament passages show Christ as the fulfillment of God's Old Testament plan. The genealogy in Matthew 1 reveals that Jesus stands in the human line of Abraham and David, immediately rooting his significance in God's previous covenantal dealings with the Jewish people. Luke's genealogy (Luke 3) goes further, taking us all the way back to Adam. Right after the genealogy, we see Christ tempted like Adam. This time, as the second Adam, he is tried in the wilderness and successfully resists the temptation. In connecting Jesus to the first man and in the recapitulation of his action, Luke connects the Gospel narratives to the argument of Paul in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15 where Adam and Christ are presented as the two archetypal human beings, counterpoints to each other. Christ's significance—our understanding of who he is and what he has done—is tied to Adam. Jesus represents the action of God in history in response to the failure of Adam.

Reformed theology has typically expressed this relationship in terms of covenants. As Adam was the covenant head of humanity under terms set by God in the garden of Eden before the fall, so Christ comes as the second Adam, the head of a new covenant, to bring his people back into full communion with God. Neither is merely a private individual, living and acting for himself. Both are representative in a way analogous to that in which a head of state represents the whole nation in a single person. Thus, as Adam is the source of the problem, so Christ is the solution.

Old Testament references and allusions permeate the descriptions of Christ in the Gospels. We cannot note them all, but even a cursory reading will show that Christ is the fulfillment of Isaiah's messianic prophecies (Luke 4:18–22), of Ezekiel 34 (Mark 6:30–44, esp. 34), the fulfillment of that for which Abraham was looking (John 8:56), and the one in whom Isaiah's own prophetic commission finds its culmination (Mark 4:11–12; cf. Isa 6:9–10). The references to the Old Testament continue in the New Testament letters, as Hebrews 1 makes it clear that Christ is the final, full, and definitive revelation of all of that which the earlier prophets spoke. Peter, in his letters, makes it clear that Christ's suffering was predicted by the Old Testament prophets (1 Pet 1:10–12). And Luke's Gospel tells us that Christ himself showed the disciples on the road to Emmaus how to read the Scriptures in light of him. Jesus showed them that he was prophesied in the Old Testament and even scolds them for being foolish and slow of heart to not see it (Luke 24:25–26).

Yet this fulfillment of the Old Testament was no easy thing. As mysterious as it is and as reverent as we must be in discussing it, it is clear from the Gospel narratives that Christ underwent huge mental and physical trials as he went about his ministry in Galilee and as he made his way inexorably to the cross. To borrow that distinction from Bonhoeffer, this is no cheap grace. Christ purchased this grace at a cost to which we cannot attach a price but at which we can only marvel in terrified awe.

In this context, we should note that Christ also fulfills the Old Testament connection between sacrifice and prayer. The Letter to the Hebrews is an extended reflection on the nature and significance of his status as the great high priest, and at the center of that role, as with the priests of the Old Testament, are the inseparable actions of sacrifice and intercession. The difference between Christ and the Old Testament priests and sacrifices is that Christ is both sacrificer and sacrifice, both the foundation for intercession and the one who intercedes. This is, to borrow from Newton's well-known hymn, amazing grace: that God himself in the person of the Son would take flesh, become priest, and sacrifice himself as victim on our behalf.

Hebrews 4:14–16 elaborates on this as follows:

> Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

If we are ever tempted to think of grace in abstract terms, then this passage, rather like the passages on sacrifice in the Old Testament, should cure us of such. The grace of God here is not simply the fact that God set forth his own Son to be a sacrifice, if that were not in itself amazing enough. It is that the incarnate Son even now continues to intercede for us on the basis of his sacrifice and does so in a manner that takes full account of his human nature and of his incarnate life. God is terrifying and awesome in his absolute holiness; yet because of his grace manifest in Christ, we are urged to approach him *with confidence*. The grace of God in Christ incarnate is the cure for all diffidence and timidity in prayer.

Jesus fulfills the covenant promises, and he is the final, perfect sacrifice for sin. He is the grace of God embodied, the one to whom our pious prayers are directed as he intercedes on our behalf. From the numerous benedictions offered in the letters of Paul (e.g., 1 Cor 16:23; 2 Cor 13:14) to the revelation of the incarnation and the work of God through the person of Jesus in the Gospels, we encounter the climactic culmination of God's work of grace in the New Testament. If grace is the unmerited favor of God, then the advent of the Son of God in human flesh is the greatest act of God's grace and the fulfillment of God's gracious purpose.

Grace and the New Creation

So powerful and so remarkable is the coming of the Christ that it does not simply involve the fulfillment of the Old Testament but also in a sense represents a new beginning, something discontinuous with the past. In the Gospel narratives, this is obvious in the announcement of the virgin birth. Yes, this is a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (Isa 7:14), but it is also something in which the grace of God was especially evident in a manner that involved a break with the past. A virginal conception is a unilateral and miraculous act of the sovereign God. There is no human means of accomplishing such a thing. It represents a break with the natural order of things. God must intervene in human history to accomplish it, and he does so in a manner that emphasizes his grace. The ESV translates Luke 1:28: "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But you could just as

accurately say "Greetings, one to whom the Lord has shown kindness/grace." The conception of Mary's son is connected to God's decision to make her a special object of his grace.

This in-breaking of grace in the coming of the Christ is of such a miraculous and powerful kind that it finds an analogue only in the act of creation itself. God creates Christ in the Virgin's womb in a manner akin to the way he created Adam from the dust of the earth. Virginal conception is a gracious conception, and the parallel between God's work in Christ and his work in the first creation is crucial to the New Testament.

This analogy between the grace of both creation and redemption is developed by Paul in his description of Christ in Colossians 1:15–20:

> The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Here Paul is not, as the Arians would argue, making Christ the greatest of the creatures in creation. He is speaking of Christ as the *agent* of creation and the one in whom the whole created world finds its unity and coherence. This role in creation is parallel with his role in the new creation, in which Christ is the head of the church and the firstborn among those who rise from the dead.

"Firstborn" is not a statement of chronological priority. In the Old Testament, the term is often used to describe preeminence. Israel is described by the Lord as his "firstborn" in Exodus 4:22, and Psalm 89:27 speaks of the Messiah as being made "my firstborn" to mean that he will be given supreme authority. When Christ is called firstborn by Paul, whether of creation (Col 1:15) or from the dead (Col 1:18), Paul is speaking of Christ's preeminence in both the original founding of the old creation and in the in-breaking of the new.

Indeed, Christ is not simply the first to rise from the dead chronologically (which would be untrue); he is the prototype for all of those who rise from the dead. In him the fullness of God dwells, and he reconciles all things to himself. The incarnation represents the unilateral gracious action of God in the new creation, just as Genesis 1 and 2 describe the old creation as the sovereign, unilateral act of God.

Titus 2:11 declares that "the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people." The incarnation is the embodiment of God's grace, its supreme revelation. Christ is grace personified. And this lays the christological foundation for the New Testament's understanding of salvation by grace, a constant theme in Paul's letters. In Romans 1:1–5, Paul declares that the life, death, and resurrection of Christ are the culmination of God's historic purposes and the means by which he has himself received grace. Later, Paul says that we obtain access to God's grace only through Christ (Rom 5:1–2). He also draws a stark contrast between grace and works. We are saved by grace, by God's free favor revealed and accomplished in Christ, not by any action we might take on our own

behalf (Rom 11:6; Gal 5:4). And this leads us to the heart of the human existential problem: in our rebellion against God, we have morally and spiritually died.

Dead in Sins, Alive by Grace

The contrast Paul draws between human works as a futile means of salvation and the work of Christ as God's gracious saving act lies at the heart of Paul's understanding of the human condition. If God's grace is his response to the tragedy of a fallen world, then Christ embodies that response.

In the narratives of the Old Testament we learn that human beings are in bondage to sin and doomed always to fail by the standards of the law. This understanding is made even more explicit in the New Testament and is given a theological rationale by Paul, who ties Adam and Christ together as the two great representatives of humanity before God (Rom 5; 1 Cor 15) and uses language of death to refer to the impact of human sin on human nature (Eph 2:1; Col 2:12). Dead in trespasses and sins, human beings are as passive as corpses in securing their own salvation from sin. Lazarus could not raise himself from the dead, and sinful human beings are equally unable to become new creations in their own strength. As Christ called Lazarus from the tomb, Christ calls morally dead human beings to life, unites them with himself, and enables them to live in the new creation.

This human depravity does not mean that all are as bad or as wicked as they can be. There is a distinct difference between the polite atheist who lives at the corner of the street and is a good neighbor and friend, and the Adolf Hitlers and the serial killers of this world. In claiming we are dead in trespasses and sins, Paul is making a point about our relationship with God: if we are to be brought back into his favor and enjoy that holy communion with him for which we were originally designed, then God must take the initiative. We do not need spiritual healing, for that would imply we are merely in need of repair. We need spiritual resurrection. And resurrection is the unilateral act of God, not a cooperative exercise between the living God and the dead. That is vital for an accurate understanding of grace. Grace is not God giving wholesome advice or a helping hand. It is God raising someone from the dead, first Christ and then those who are in Christ.

Paul dramatically makes this point in his letter to the church at Ephesus. He starts the letter by pronouncing a benediction on God for blessing Christians with every spiritual blessing in Christ. This action he roots in Christology and in God's eternal decision. God's grace starts with election in Christ and aims at holiness before him and adoption as God's sons and daughters, all to the praise of his glorious grace. In the next chapter, Paul says that even though the Ephesian Christians were dead in their sins, yet God has made them alive in Christ. This act of God's grace is only grasped by faith, which itself is the gift of God.

Grace, Election, and the New Birth

But how, exactly, is this grace realized in the lives of individual people? At this point, Paul looks at the gracious act of God in the work of predestination. We will take a closer look at the question of predestination and a number of ways in which it has been interpreted throughout history in subsequent chapters. Here, however, I'd like to note several key points.

First, Paul says that our election is *in Christ*. Election cannot be understood without reference to the life and work of the Lord Jesus. It is not an abstract, mechanistic, and impersonal action, a form of

determinism as advocated by ancient atomists or more recent deists. God acts in history to save those who are elect *in* the Lord Jesus Christ.

Second, this election is of grace. God does not call Abram because he is a particularly impressive or influential figure. He calls him simply because he decides to choose him and not another (Gen 12:1–3; Isa 51:2). The decision to choose Abraham was not based on intrinsic merit or foreseen faith but solely on the Lord's will and his gracious plan. God often reminded Abraham's descendants that their election was an act of sovereign grace:

> For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deut 7:6–8)

The same basic idea underlies New Testament teaching on election. Romans 9 is a key passage to examine on this issue.[6] In addressing God's grace toward Israel, Paul underlines the sovereignty of God's choice in the matter, a choice not based on intrinsic merit but solely in God himself. To the objection that it is unjust for God to act in this way, Paul responds in Romans 9:20 with an emphatic dismissal: Who are you to answer back to God? The nuances of interpreting this passage proved to be highly contentious in the history of the church, as we shall see in later chapters. But Paul's broader point is clear to everyone: grace is wonderful and deeply mysterious. Because it originates in God himself and has no extrinsic human rationale, we should adore the merciful God it reveals.

This is an important point because, as we noted above, human beings are dead in trespasses and sins, and grace is the divine response to our human predicament. A mere pep talk or a bit of life coaching won't do; we need resurrection, and that has to come from the outside. Lazarus could not raise himself from the dead; nor could he cooperate in the process. It was only by divine intervention of the most dramatic kind that he was called back from the grave. Lazarus is a paradigm of the grace of God in action, what the New Testament calls the new birth (i.e., regeneration; cf. John 3:1–8). And all rebellious human beings are like Lazarus, dead in their rebellion (Eph 2:1) and incapable of moving toward God by themselves. If human beings are to receive spiritual life, it has to come to them as the free gift of God. Paul makes this clear when talking about the remnant in Romans 11. In that passage he draws a clear antithesis between election by grace and election on the basis of works (Rom 11:5–6).

This is where regeneration becomes significant. God's saving action is focused in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and its scope is connected to his decision in eternity to elect human beings to salvation. This is what theologians typically refer to as the history of salvation, the story of God's actions in Christ. It provides the foundation for what is called the order of salvation, which is the way in which the grand scheme of salvation comes to be appropriated by individuals. While I will address this at numerous points in subsequent chapters, the basic point is this: God in the person of the Holy Spirit unites individuals to Christ by faith in his word as it is proclaimed; and this is his

action, not a team effort between the living God and the human dead in sins. Romans 8:10–11 testifies to this:

> But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.

Elsewhere, Paul ties this power of regeneration both to the preaching of the word and of the Spirit as they work in tandem (1 Thess 1:4–5). God regenerates through means—the word—but it is still God who regenerates by his Spirit, not human beings by their own efforts.[7]

It should be obvious by now that our understanding of grace is coordinate with our understanding of sin. If one thinks sin is, say, just ignorance, then a notion of grace as better teaching or more accurate knowledge will be quite adequate. If one thinks of the human condition as one of moral death, then only grace, which is a powerful, unilateral action of God, will suffice. As John Calvin expresses the matter at the start of his famous *Institutes*, the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves are intimately connected. As we understand more accurately the depth of our problem, so we come more accurately to understand the power of God's solution.

The Purpose of Grace

At this point, however, we should note that grace is more than simply the unmerited favor of God displayed and enacted in Christ. Grace also has a purpose. Romans 8:29–30 unites the origin of the Christian life in predestination to its end in glorification. In Ephesians 2:10 we read that good works have been prepared by God beforehand for believers to perform. This tells us that being saved by grace is more than just a notion, a legal fiction, or a pleasing idea. The gracious work that God has done in Christ has real implications.

The most obvious place to see this is in the structure of Paul's New Testament letters. Theologians and biblical scholars have sometimes referred to Paul's progression from indicatives (statements) to imperatives (commands). Paul roots the imperatives of the Christian faith in the indicatives of the Christian faith, making his practical applications—what believers are to do—on the basis of what God in Christ has already done. For example, Paul transitions in his letter to the Colossians from a magnificent elaboration of Christ's person and work to the identity of the Colossians as they are united to Christ. From there, he proceeds to press on them specific behaviors that should characterize that identity. They are to put to death sexual immorality, impurity, passion, and evil desires. They should be good members of their households, fulfilling their respective duties to each other. But the reason why they do these things is not because Christ is a great moral example. They are to do these things because they have been the recipients of God's grace in Christ. In Christ they have a new identity. The work of Christ has changed who they are, and their new identity should now transform how they live.

Consider an imperfect parallel. Those who are Americans are (ideally) committed to the Constitution and the laws of the land. Americans should act like Americans because there is a national identity that is formed by their history and the documents and laws that have given rise to that

national identity. This is who they are. If the United States declares war on Iraq, that decision immediately changes every American's relationship to Iraq. Americans will now behave in a certain way toward Iraq (e.g., not giving its government state secrets, not fighting for the Iraqi army). They do this not because they imitate their president but because their identity is American.

In both the New Testament and the Old, practical ethics connect to God's grace because it is God's gracious action that indicatively determines the identity of his people and the imperatives of their lives. In Deuteronomy 10 the Lord declares that he is sovereign, and he reminds the people of Israel of how he chose to love their forefathers. Then he reminds them of his character:

> For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. (Deut 10:17–18)

These are the great indicatives. They describe who God is and speak of his gracious and merciful character. These are followed by the imperative punch line: "And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt" (v. 19).

Because God is who he is and has acted to make Israel his people, the people must now reflect that identity in their own dealing with the widow and the sojourner. His grace toward them has changed them, and now, because of the work of God in loving and saving them, they should treat others differently.

Grace as Transforming

All of this points us toward a second strand of New Testament teaching on grace. Grace can also refer to the cleansing, regenerating, and transforming work of God in the lives of believers. Grace as God's unmerited favor finds practical expression as it changes believers into what God would have them be.

A good example of this is found in Paul's words about the Macedonian church in 2 Corinthians 8. In the context of the letter Paul is defending his ministry in the face of criticism among some in the congregation at Corinth. By the time he gets to chapter eight in the letter, Paul is confident that an earlier letter of rebuke that he had previously sent has had its effect and that the majority of congregants are now defending his ministry and the gospel it embodies. In chapter seven, Paul praises the Corinthians for this, but he presses them further in the following chapter. He tells them that the sign of their true repentance is not only their change in attitude to his ministry but whether or not they will complete the offering that is intended for the support of their brothers and sisters in the Jerusalem church. He points them to the example of the Macedonians, who, at the cost of personal hardship, have been keen so to do.

Here is why this is particularly interesting for our examination of grace. Paul writes: "And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity" (2 Cor 8:1–2).

Paul characterizes the actions of the Macedonians as the grace of God. As the Macedonians give

out of their poverty, their actions themselves are an act of God's grace. While much of our focus this chapter has been on understanding grace as the unmerited favor of God, we need to grasp that the biblical concept is even broader. At times, believers' behavior itself is spoken of as an embodiment of God's grace. As they have received freely, so they give freely, not as law but as part of their identity. Indeed, Paul reinforces this with the christological argument of verse 9, where he says that Christ gave up his riches and became poor so that the Corinthians (and indeed all believers everywhere) might become rich. God's grace must necessarily be worked out in the life of the church, and if grace involves a movement from death to life, it is inevitable that this new life will show forth in outward ways. Thus, grace will manifest itself in giving (2 Cor 9:8) and elsewhere in the increase of thanksgiving (2 Cor 4:15).

Grace is more than an objective concept of God's unmerited favor. It has a practical outworking in the lives of believers through the work of the Holy Spirit. In fact, the work of the Holy Spirit can itself be called "grace." For example, Paul sees his own ministry, in which he tirelessly works and labors, as work done in and by the grace of God. As he says in 1 Corinthians 15:10, "I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me." Paul's work is not really his work at all; it is the grace of God at work in and through him.

Given all this, it should not surprise us to find that grace lies at the heart of piety in the New Testament as it did in the Old. The archetypal New Testament prayer, patterned after the Lord's Prayer itself, is the prayer that Christ places in the mouth of the tax collector in the temple in the parable of Luke 18:10–14. The Pharisee presumes to stand before God and parade his own righteousness, while the tax collector stands at a distance with his head hanging low, beating his chest, calling out for the Lord to be merciful to him. The tax collector offers no basis in himself for such a plea but simply looks to God's grace. He is the one who returns to his house justified.

Grace and Blessing

Finally, just as grace encompasses both the origin and the ongoing power of the Christian life, so references to grace bookend many of the New Testament letters. Paul's letters often begin with a salutation containing a reference to God's grace. The apostolic greeting, "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ," occurs in a multitude of Pauline passages (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:3; Eph 1:2; Phil 1:2; Col 1:2; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:2; and Phlm 3). John uses a variation in Revelation 1:4. These are so common that they seem instinctive for Paul in greeting the churches. For Paul and the other apostles, to think of a church was to think of God's grace. Just as Old Testament Israel had received her identity from God's gracious action toward her and was constantly reminded of that by the Aaronic blessing, so the New Testament church lives by grace alone.

New Testament benedictions testify to the church both as the beneficiary of God's unmerited favor and as the object of the active work of his grace in the present. Thus, the writer to the Hebrews closes his letter with this:

> Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus

Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Heb 13:20–21)

Here we see the various strands of biblical teaching on grace woven together in a remarkable blessing. The writer speaks of God's work in Christ. He draws a connection to the story of God's people in the Old Testament. He refers to the efficacy of atoning sacrifice and God's covenant commitment to his people. He mentions the active equipping of the saints by this grace to do work that is pleasing to God. In short, this simple benediction reminds us that God's grace through the history of God's people, both his work for them and his work in them, is encapsulated by grace, as expressed in this benediction.

Conclusion

This is an admittedly brief survey of grace in the Bible, yet it reveals that the word and the concept are pervasive in Scripture. No theology that credibly claims to be biblical can avoid addressing it. From the fall of Adam and Eve and God's decision to spare them from immediate destruction, the story of God's relationship to human beings is the story of grace. It relates the historical outworking of his unmerited favor toward humanity as he restrains evil and actively works to save his people from the consequences of their sinful rebellion.

Grace is God's response to the fall, and it must always be understood in that context. This means that one's understanding of sin inevitably shapes one's understanding of grace, and one's understanding of grace will reveal what one thinks about sin. When we fully appreciate the destructive and pervasive effects of the fall, we more clearly recognize the need for grace to address our fundamental problem.

As I pointed out when we began, grace must not to be reduced to a mere sentiment on the part of God. God does not choose to overlook humanity's sin and treat men and women as if nothing has happened. The original Edenic relationship has been ruptured. In Adam, we live in condemnation and death for our rebellion. Grace involves action on God's part because sin requires atonement. A biblical understanding of grace must first recognize the context of the Old Testament system of sacrifice and its eventual fulfillment and culmination in the work of Jesus Christ. One cannot talk of grace without recognizing fallen humanity's plight and the atoning work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In later chapters we will examine in more detail the practical implications of a biblical understanding of grace for the church and for individual Christians. Here I will simply observe that grace assumes tragedy. It is because the world is not as it should be that God is gracious. It is because after the fall we are in rebellion against him because of our sinful nature that he acts in the face of the rebellion. It is because we have chosen death that he sends his Son to die in our place. Grace is both divine attitude and divine action, and grace reveals the tragic circumstances into which the human race has fallen.

All of this must have a practical impact on the Christian life. Grace is not a license to do as we please. As we noted above, grace involves sacrifice and is thus a violent, bloody thing. Grace is powerful, overwhelming, transformative. It shatters our notions of autonomy, it heals our deepest wounds, and it meets the deepest longings of the human heart. And in all of church history, no one has alerted the church to this fact more clearly than the fifth-century bishop of Hippo Regius in North Africa named Augustine. To his writings we now turn.

1. For a treatment of *sola Scriptura*, see Matthew Barrett, *God's Word Alone—The Authority of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016).

2. It is worth noting here that in the Roman Catholic Church grace is very closely connected to the sacraments as the means whereby grace is mediated to the individual Christian. This is very different to the notion of grace as the subjective work of the Holy Spirit that we find in Protestantism and that is not inextricably attached to the sacraments in the same manner at all.

3. The Hebrew term *khen*, which is typically translated as "grace," carries the meaning of "favor," as does the verb *khanan* and its cognates.

4. Theologians typically make a distinction between "mercy" and "grace." They regard "grace" as the goodness of God shown to people irrespective of what they actually deserve. "Mercy" is the unmerited goodness of God toward those who have sinned and are guilty. The distinction is a fine one and perhaps not greatly significant. Mercy, we might say, is a specific form of grace.

5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer memorably distinguishes between cheap grace and costly grace: "Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church. We are fighting to-day for costly grace. . . . Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner. . . . [Costly grace] is *costly* because it cost God the life of his Son" (*The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller [New York: Touchstone, 1995], 43, 45).

6. For more in-depth treatments than can be provided here, see John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1–23*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003); Robert A. Peterson, *Election and Free Will: God's Gracious Choice and Our Responsibility* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007); Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware, eds., *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000); Matthew Barrett and Thomas Nettles, eds., *Whomever He Wills: A Sovereign Display of Sovereign Mercy* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders, 2012).

7. Of course, this area of election and regeneration has proved one of the most contentious matters of theology over the centuries, as will become clear in subsequent chapters. In part this is because the matters on which it touches are so close to how we understand God, ourselves, our relationship to him, and indeed our experience of the spiritual life. Often the debate is cast in terms of *monergism* (God acting sovereignly and logically prior to any human response, and thus determining the nature of that response) and *synergism* (God and human beings acting cooperatively in such a way that the human response has a decisive impact). Both monergists and synergists would argue that they believe in the importance and nonnegotiability of God's grace. But they would assign different ultimate significance to that grace.

CHAPTER 2
Grace Narrated: Augustine's *Confessions*

> But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect.
>
> *1 Corinthians 15:10*

The history of theology is essentially a story. How one tells that story, which characters and places and actions receive prominence, will vary from historian to historian. But when we look at the "history of grace," an undisputed key figure in that history is Augustine, fifth-century bishop of Hippo Regius in North Africa. Augustine's life and writings profoundly shaped all later debates about grace. Whether it is John Calvin refining and developing Augustine's thought, or Karl Barth attempting a wholesale reconstruction of predestination in response, Augustine is the man who dominates any discussion about grace, even to our own day.

It is thus impossible to understand the debates about grace in the Protestant Reformation without first understanding the thought of Augustine. And whether one loves him or hates him, one cannot ignore him. He wrote profoundly on a vast number of topics, from the Trinity to eschatology, and his writings set the terms of debate for theological discussions that happened well over a millennium after his death. A number of his books (*Confessions* and *The City of God*) are still available in cheap paperback editions from mainstream, nonreligious publishers, an indication that they have earned a place in the general literary canon.

Augustine was a particularly important figure among the Reformers because of his teaching on God's grace. Access to his writings in the Middle Ages had generally been through books of sentences, extended collections of quotations around theological themes. But with the advent of the printing press and a rising interest in patristic literature, fueled by Renaissance humanism, many scholars were now able to read Augustine's complete texts. As they did so, they found him to be a helpful guide in wrestling with the Bible, especially the letters of Paul. For many, their understanding of Paul and his teaching on grace was profoundly shaped by the insights of the bishop of Hippo. As nineteenth-century Presbyterian theologian B. B. Warfield later commented: "The Reformation, inwardly considered, was just the ultimate triumph of Augustine's doctrine of grace over Augustine's doctrine of the Church."[1]

Of course, things are a little more complicated than Warfield implies. Augustine was a major source for Lutheran, Reformed, and, indeed, Roman Catholic scholars, but other influences and other

factors played their role as well. Nevertheless, it's impossible to overstate Augustine's influence. One cannot understand the Reformation without addressing the theology of grace expounded by Augustine. As Warfield implies, it would be possible to frame the entire history of Reformation thought as a debate about the reception and interpretation of Augustine's writings and legacy. Indeed, so important was the work of the bishop of Hippo to the conflict of the sixteenth century that whichever side could make the best claim to being his heir would in so doing have come close to victory in any doctrinal debate.

Yet there is more to Augustine than a straightforward theological or exegetical exposition of grace. Like many great theologians, Augustine's theology was forged in the context of his own autobiography. His contribution to our understanding of grace starts as a narration of his experience of God's grace in his own life. His encounter with grace was deeply personal, and he presented it as such to the wider public in his intriguing and complex book *Confessions*.[2]

The *Confessions* presents a first-person narration of his early life and shares how Augustine moved from being a vessel of wrath to a vessel of grace. This book later triggered the so-called Pelagian controversy, though, as with so many named controversies in church history, Pelagius was far from the most brilliant or most important advocate of the "Pelagian" position. As we seek to understand Augustine and his teaching on grace, we will first look to the *Confessions*, then to the reasons for the controversy it stirred, and then (in the next chapter) to the ways in which that controversy led Augustine to turn his personal narrative of grace into a sharper, more clearly defined, universal narrative of the ways of God in salvation.

Grace in the Early Church

One of the odd things about the ancient church is that the existential struggle that seems to lie at the heart of Paul's understanding of grace, particularly as it is articulated in his letter to the Romans, is essentially absent from Christian writings prior to Augustine. Of course, there are some reasons that may account for this. First, we need to remember that we have only a small portion of the Christian literature that must have existed during this period. Many works and writings have been lost or destroyed over the centuries. Further, most Christians would have been illiterate or would not have written down their thoughts, so we do not know how ordinary believers thought about or experienced the Christian life. Yet if we examine what we do have, we find that discussions of grace prior to Augustine did not elaborate much on the idea of grace as God's unmerited favor.

For example, in the works of Clement, one of the earliest postapostolic writers, grace functions as part of the standard greetings and farewells in Christian letters.[3] We also find several early church fathers quoting Paul's statements on grace, though they typically cite them without offering any further explanation of their meaning. Polycarp, second-century bishop of Smyrna, quotes Ephesians 2:8–9, but he does not give any further elaboration.[4] In short, there is little explicit explication or elaboration of the biblical teaching on grace in these writings.

Based on the writings that we do have today, it appears that in the third and fourth centuries the attention of the church was primarily focused on the details of Christology and specifically on the relationship between the Father and the Son. These questions and writings were part of the process by which Trinitarian theology came to be formed. In this context, it was the christological dimension of God's grace, the idea that Christ embodied the unmerited favor of God toward a sinful world, which

was the focus of attention. Along with this, references to the power of God's grace within the church, preserving and sanctifying her, were also common. Nevertheless, the emphasis in teaching on grace during this time was on Christ as the manifestation and focal point of God's gracious action. The means by which God's gracious purposes were executed in the church, appropriated by individuals, and experienced by believers were not widely discussed. In some cases, where they were mentioned, they were assumed rather than explained.[5]

The Background to Grace: Confessing Sin

The *Confessions* is a quintessential late fourth-century book. In the fourth century Christianity was becoming the dominant cultural and political force within the Roman Empire. For a religion that had started on the margins of society and had grown through suffering and persecution, this newfound position and respectability raised a whole host of new questions for the church, among them "What does genuine Christianity look like in a world where being a Christian has become really rather easy?" Or another way of saying it, more in line with our culture today, would be to ask: "What does the grace of God in the life of a Christian look like at a time when Christianity is winning the cultural war?" This was one of the questions Augustine was trying to work out in his autobiography as he wrote with parchment and stylus.

When Augustine composed his *Confessions* in the 390s, he was reflecting on events that had happened several years earlier, and he was writing with a purpose. The reader of an autobiography should remember that the writer's memory may not be perfect, and the narrative is shaped by the desires of the author to reveal—and to hide—those things that serve his larger ends. To borrow a thought from Søren Kierkegaard, we all live life forward, but we write it down in reverse. Through the process of writing, the autobiographer finds order and coherence in life that was not part of the original experience or intentions. In this sense, autobiography is self-justification. In the *Confessions*, Augustine was seeking to justify the ways of God to humanity, but he was also trying to justify the ways of Augustine to humanity as well.

The work consists of thirteen books. The first nine deal with his life and experiences, while the final four cover broader theological and metaphysical themes. On first reading, many find the move from book 10 to book 11 to be disorienting and disconcerting. The difference between the engaging personal narrative and the reflections on creation, time and eternity, and the problem of evil gives the work the feel of two separate books that have been bound together for some unknown reason. Yet there is a deep and unifying logic to the whole. First, the entire work is cast as an extended prayer to God, and Augustine takes a standard classical genre—the philosophical treatise, which opens with a prayer—and both radicalizes and Christianizes it. The entire book is essentially one long prayer to the God of the Bible. Second, the first part of the work tells the particular story of Augustine, as he moves away from God and then back into communion with him, while the second half universalizes that story to encompass the whole of creation. It is perhaps a bit ironic that the subsequent history of grace follows this same pattern: taking Augustine's own personal experience of the work of God in his life and systematizing and universalizing it.

So Augustine takes a standard genre among certain schools of philosophy and expands it, turning the whole of his treatise into one sustained devotional address to God. The *Confessions* is not just an autobiographical account of grace in Augustine's life; it is presented as an act of acknowledging

God's grace, demonstrating humble and total dependence on God. While it is not a work of systematic theology, it points toward a number of doctrinal notions. The incipient theology of the *Confessions* triggered the Pelagian controversy and led to the elaboration of Augustine's later, more mature thinking on grace. The *Confessions* is his theology in an intuitive, embryonic form. We see the notion of sin, for example, as fundamental to Augustine's thinking about grace and dramatically presented in the work.

The Restless Heart

In the first chapter of this book I mention that the biblical teaching on grace begins by setting grace up as a response to the fallen condition of this world and of humanity. How we understand grace—as the solution to this fallen condition—is determined to a large extent by how we understand the extent and nature of the problem. At the core of Augustine's understanding of the human condition lies an existential observation: the human heart is restless. Left to its own devices, the heart never finds the satisfaction it craves but moves on from object of love to object of love as each in turn fails to answer its deepest needs. The human condition, this side of our exile from Eden, is one of unending restlessness. At the start of the *Confessions* Augustine declares that the heart is restless above all things until it finds its repose in God.[6]

This declaration sets the tone for the whole work as both a prayer to God and an attempt to locate human beings as people searching for peace within the cosmos that God has created. This also provides Augustine an opportunity to raise fundamental questions of human existence in relationship to God: Do we call on God or praise him first? How can we call on one we do not first know? And how do we therefore come to know God? While Augustine does not make it explicit at this point, his answer to all of these questions highlights the priority of God's grace. God must *first* make himself known before we can know him, and he must *first* call us before we can call on him; and then his grace works within us to enable us to do this.

Augustine is clear that this is not simply an epistemological issue. He connects it directly to the fallen and sinful state of humanity. Our sin alienates us from God and turns us away from our Creator and toward the creation as we look for the source of life's meaning. Augustine sees all of this as an aspect of the curse, a shadow that falls on every human being from the moment of our conception. After the opening section, Augustine reflects on his infancy, how he was suckled at his mother's breast. His demand for his mother's breast and his fury when he did not get his own way speak of his innate selfishness. He shares this story as evidence of the inherent selfishness of human beings. Even little infants, before they have learned the patterns of behavior to which society will train them, are self-centered, looking with seething resentment on others to whom their mothers might give milk. An infant may appear sweet and harmless, but its harmlessness lies in the weakness of its body. Make no mistake, the mind of a newborn is already corrupt and vicious. Here we find the seeds of Augustine's later and more elaborate understanding of original sin present in his autobiographical observations.[7]

Augustine's "Fall"

Infants may be born in sin, but Augustine also gives literary shape to the idea of the fall in his *Confessions* through an account of one of his youthful indiscretions. Augustine is often seen as

identifying sin with sex—the theologian responsible for the alleged Christian disapproval of sexual pleasure—and certainly there is evidence to support this view. Augustine seems to have felt particularly guilty about his pre-Christian sexual activities, even though they seem hardly dramatic by the standards of his own day, much less our own. He also believed that the pleasure provided by sex was the result of the fall, not something created by God and part of the original created order. Yet while Augustine did identify sin with love of self and believed that sin was inherent in the fallen sexual act, it was not an adolescent sexual encounter that he chose to explain our fallen condition. Instead, he chose a rather mundane act of juvenile theft.

In book 2.4 of the *Confessions*, Augustine describes an incident in which he and some friends decided to steal from a neighbor:

> Surely thy law, O Lord, punishes thievery; yea, and this law is so written in our hearts, that iniquity itself cannot blot it out. For what thief does willingly abide another man to steal from him? No, not a rich thief, him that is driven to steal upon necessity. Yet had I a desire to commit thievery; and did it, compelled neither by hunger nor poverty; but even through a cloyedness of well doing, and a pamperedness of iniquity. For I stole that, of which I had enough of mine own, and much better. Nor when I had done, cared I to enjoy the thing which I had stolen, but joying in the theft and sin itself. A pear-tree there was in the orchard next our vineyard, well laden with fruit, not much tempting either for colour or taste. To the shaking and robbing of this, a company of lewd young fellows of us went late one night, (having, according to our pestilent custom in the game-places, continued our sports even till that season): thence carried we huge loadings, not for our own lickerishness, but even to fling to the hogs, though perhaps we ate some of it. And all this we did, because we would go whither we should not. Behold my heart, O Lord, which thou hadst pity on in the very bottom of the bottomless pit. Now, behold, let my heart tell thee, what it sought for there, that I should be thus evil for nothing, having no other provocation to ill, but ill itself. It was foul, yet I loved it, I loved to undo myself, I loved mine own fault, not that for which I committed the fault, but even the very fault itself; a base soul, shrinking back thus from my holdfast upon thee, even to utter destruction; not affecting anything from the shame, but the shame itself.[8]

The passage is a beautiful fusion of narrative and theology. The trivial details of the incident draw the reader into the story in a subtle but personal way. Had Augustine described a high crime or misdemeanor—a murder, a major robbery, an act of treason against the state—the reader might come away shocked but would have likely not identified with the protagonist. Few readers would have had any experience of committing, or even being tempted to commit, such crimes. Yet an act of petty theft is the sort of sin that every child has either committed or attempted. The story draws the reader in as something they can identify with—the stealing of fruit from a neighbor's tree. We read the passage, and we see something of ourselves. The narrative sets a theological trap.

The choice of a tree and fruit is also intentional because of the clear resonances with the biblical narrative of the original sin of Adam. A thoughtful reader is immediately carried back from the "fall" of Augustine in his neighbor's garden to the fall of Adam in the garden of Eden. Augustine's personal

story relates a common sin with which we can all identify and connects it with the universal biblical narrative. We all know what this type of sin looks like. And in recognizing it in ourselves we see that we are also fallen in Adam.

In this identification, the trap is sprung, and Augustine's autobiography suddenly becomes the story of Everyman. We read the story, we identify with the actors within it, and then we find that we are bound up in the sin of Adam, the archetypal stealer of fruit. Augustine may not yet have developed his later, more elaborate understanding of what it means to be fallen in Adam, but here we see the seed of his later reflections in the narrative. We see him pointing our attention to the problem of humanity, the problem to which grace will be the divine solution.

Augustine's story also brings out some of the dynamic realities of sin. If grace is a response to the human condition, then it is important to know what that human condition is in some detail. So what is the nature and extent of the problem to which God's grace is the response and solution? Augustine is careful to emphasize that the theft of the pears lacks any intrinsic rationale. This underlines the pointlessness and the irrationality of sin. If Augustine had been starving and these pears were the only food available, then the crime would have made sense. It would still have been wrong, but there would have been a reason for his actions. We can all sympathize with the starving man who steals food, even if we do not approve of theft. Or if the pears were simply better tasting or juicier than the pears Augustine himself had in his own garden, then the crime might have also had a logic to it. It would have been comprehensible at some level, even if still sinful and wrong. But Augustine sets up the narrative in a way that will allow neither option. He is very clear about this: he had absolutely no need of these pears and no excuse for stealing them. In fact, he had free and legitimate access to other, better ones, to eat. The point of this incident is not to demonstrate that sin has an inner logic—that it makes sense even if you disagrees with it morally. No, the point of the story is to show us that sin has no inner logic. Fallen people sin simply because they wish to break the law.

This reveals that sin has a function, one connected to the restlessness of the fallen human heart. Human beings fool themselves into believing that they are God. How does Augustine show this?

The Existential Problem

For Augustine, the existential problem of humanity can be understood by asking a question: Who or what should I love? The restlessness of the human heart is driven by a single desire: to find that which, when made the object of love, gives rest and peace to the soul. As God lives eternally as a communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in perfect, mutual love, so human beings made in God's image are designed to find their perfection in loving another. But whom or what are they to love?

The only correct answer, of course, is God. Only when God is made the object of our love and our hearts rest in him can our restless souls find peace. Human beings are made to find their fulfillment and meaning in him in a real and ultimate sense. But the tragedy is that fallen human beings are turned in on themselves. We ask the right question—"Whom should I love?"—but we are doomed to give the wrong answer. We love ourselves in the place of God. And this means that our souls will be ever moving on, striving to find peace and never coming to rest.

Sin serves this end in a paradoxical way. Returning to Augustine's story of the stolen pears, we might ask why he found pleasure in stealing the fruit. Was it because it was something forbidden? Why did the transgression appear to him as an attractive end in itself, with no further rationale

necessary? The answer is a moral and psychological one. When I break God's law, I stand above God's law, and I feel like I am God, the one in control. Seeing myself as one who lives under the law is a constant reminder to me that I am not God but a creature, subject to his rule. The sheer delight Augustine found in stealing the mediocre and bitter pears was not a delight in the intrinsic merits of pears themselves. It was the pleasure of pretending to himself that he was God.

When I transgress God's law, like the high that comes immediately after taking a stimulant drug, I feel that I have found the answer to my deepest longing. But like this artificial high, the effect wears off, and I need to transgress again and again and again to maintain the illusion that I am God and that I've found the solution to my problem in myself. This is the addictive deception that lies at the heart of sin for Augustine. It is a turning in on oneself, focusing on oneself as the object of love. In a memorable passage in book 3, he talks about being in love with the idea of love itself:

> I was not in love as yet, yet I loved to be in love, and with a more secret kind of want, I hated myself having little want. I sought about for something to love, loving still to be in love: security I hated, and that way too that had no snares in it: and all because I had a famine within me, even of that inward food (thyself, O God) though that famine made me not hungry.[9]

In this passage, Augustine analyzes his psychological state as a fallen human being. Since human beings are designed to find their fulfillment in loving God, in giving themselves to him, the basic question facing each and every human being is, "What must I love to be fully human?" Fallen humans under the mastery of sin answer, "Myself." We believe that loving ourselves is the answer to our problems. Yet this love cuts us off from God and dooms us to a life of dissatisfaction. Because only God can fully satisfy the longing of the human heart for rest, then all objects of love, if made the ultimate end of human existence, condemn the one who loves them to dissatisfaction, restlessness, and permanent separation from God. Sin, one might say, is the wrong answer to the right question.

The Power of Sin

The picture Augustine paints in the *Confessions* is stark and disturbing. Sin is a pervasive power that controls and defines human beings. It is something that dominates personal existence and offers no means of escape. If we are to be free, our deliverance must come from someone outside ourselves. Augustine draws out the enslaving power of sin through another dramatic story. In book 6.8 he relates a story, recounting the visit of a close friend, Alypius, to the gladiatorial games. Alypius detested the violence of combat, but against his better judgment he went to the circus. As he entered the stadium he vowed that he would keep his eyes firmly closed during the combat, refusing to gaze on the slaughter, but he was not able to keep that vow. At some point, one of the gladiators struck his opponent a mortal blow, and the crowd roared. Alypius instinctively opened his eyes, and the gruesome sight utterly transformed him:

> Which noise entered through his ears, and unlocked his eyes, to make way for the striking and beating down of his soul, which was bold rather than valiant heretofore; and so much the weaker, for that it had trusted on itself, which ought only to have trusted on thee. For so

> soon as he saw the blood, he at the very instant drunk down a kind of savageness; nor did he turn away his head, but fixed his eye upon it, drinking up unawares the very Furies themselves; being much taken with the barbarousness of the sword-fight, and even drunk again with that bloodthirsty joy. Nor was he now the man he was when he came first thither, but become one of the throng he came unto; yea, an entire companion of theirs that brought him thither. What shall I say more? He looked on, he cried out for company, he was inflamed with it, carried home such a measure of madness as spurred him on to come another time: and that not only in their company who first haled him on, but to run before them too, yea, and hale on others also.[10]

The narrative conveys something of the power of sin. Augustine draws an analogy between the lethal blow inflicted on the gladiator and the more lethal blow inflicted on the soul of his friend. The sight of the slaughter morally slays Alypius such that, when he opens his eyes and the scene of pornographic violence enters his mind, he is transformed into a different person. Even modern studies in brain physiology have demonstrated that external stimuli transform the nature of the brain and change the way we think. It is a physical reality. Neural pathways can be adjusted by learning to speak a foreign language or to play a musical instrument, but on the more sinister side, exposure to scenes of extreme violence or to pornography can also alter our neural pathways in a way that the brain craves these things.[11] These cravings can override rational considerations and choices of behavior.

Augustine's narrative of the incident of Alypius and the gladiatorial contest seems to be a naive account of precisely this phenomenon. For Augustine (as for us) sin has a physical impact, and this is part of the way in which it binds human beings to behavior that deviates from God's word. Augustine's *Confessions* offer an intuitive account of something far more complicated than he himself understood. Hundreds of years before brain physiology alerted us to the fact of neuroplasticity and the impact of extreme images on our neural pathways, Augustine describes precisely the kind of dramatic change that a scene of extreme violence can cause. Alypius is hooked on the bloodlust of the circus. He emerges changed, different from the person that he was before. And the reader gains a valuable insight into the powerful grip that sin has over the fallen human mind. It dominates the whole person, body and soul, and holds humanity in a death grip. It is a creative force for evil, changing people in fundamental ways.

Augustine presents the human condition under sin in narrative form, showing that sin turns us inward on ourselves. Sin places the self where God should be, and it has such an awesome and unconquerable power that our whole being is in thrall to it. Augustine may not be thinking systematically in the *Confessions*, but his intuitive, narrative description presents Paul's understanding of sin as something that requires a solution from outside ourselves. We are enslaved, and it will take the full power of God's undeserved grace and mercy to free us.

The Grace of Christ

The *Confessions* is filled with human drama, and all drama is built on conflict. The conflict here is between good and evil, and the theater on which the drama plays out is the human individual. Augustine is a man divided against himself, and as the narrative builds, it leads us to a moment in a

garden in Milan where God's grace overwhelms Augustine. There is a battle here, between Augustine's flesh and God's Spirit.

In the midst of this conflict, Augustine turns to the writings of Paul. In Paul he finds someone who can explain what he is experiencing within himself. Indeed, this was critical for Augustine's abandonment of what had, up until that point, been his philosophical school of choice: Platonism.[12] Platonism was unable to explain the deep restlessness and the struggles taking place within his own soul, so he abandoned that philosophy and turned to the religion of his mother to see whether there were answers there. Reading Paul pointed him to the solution to his troubles: Jesus Christ.[13]

The conflict Augustine sensed in his own soul and found analyzed in Paul led him to see that the human problem was not lack of knowledge. The philosophies of his day had convinced him of the existence of an infinite god, but they were incapable of speaking to his human condition. Augustine was a person with a need for transcendence and rest for his desires, yet he could not find these within himself. He came to realize that this was a moral need, that it was his very desire for autonomy and self-determination that prevented him from finding rest in God. Sin dominated him, and he chafed under its bridle.

Against this background of sin, of Augustine's complete subservience to the power of death at work in him, he experiences his conversion. In the *Confessions*, Augustine draws a literary connection between this incident and that of the pears in book 2. Both have a garden context. Both involve a tree. And both stories have a strong resonance with the biblical narrative. But this does not mean that they are fictitious, a literary ploy. It seems most likely that the pear incident was selected from his many youthful indiscretions to make a literary point, connecting to the biblical story and to his later conversion.

Scholars are divided over exactly what it is that Augustine can be said to be converted from and to in the Milanese garden. Later evangelical traditions have tended to read this story in light of their own understanding of a crisis experience of conviction of sin, leading to the new birth and turning from sin to Christ in repentance and faith. More recently, Garry Wills, maverick Roman Catholic, has argued that it represents a turn to a life of sexual continence and celibacy, powered by the work of God's grace.[14]

But we need not see these two accounts as mutually exclusive. For Augustine, his perceived sexual incontinence was the most obvious and powerful manifestation of his fundamental identity as a rebel against God's rule. It exemplified his desire to find his satisfaction in himself and his own pleasures rather than in God. What matters is not the specific details of the conversion and which sins he repudiated, but his sense of the overwhelming power of God in his deliverance.[15] Describing the crescendo of conflict prior to his conversion, Augustine writes:

> 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?[16]

Here he picks up Paul's language in Romans 7 and makes it his own. Paul's battle is now his battle. He is a man at war against himself. In the words of A. E. Houseman, "They kill and kill and never die, And I think that each is I."[17] Augustine is trapped in this mortal struggle for his own soul. And then the crisis moment comes, once again involving a tree and thus pointing back both to Adam's fall and his own "fall" with the pears, but also to the work of Christ on the cross.

In *Confessions* 8.12 he describes the crisis moment of his conversion. There, in the garden, as he tries desperately to solve his inner conflict, he suddenly hears a mysterious voice, apparently that of a neighbor's child, calling out "Take up and read! Take up and read!" He picks up the letter before him, Paul's letter to the Romans, reading Romans 13:13–14. And suddenly all is clear and his soul is calmed. This was the word, the word from outside, the word from God, that led him to cast off his old life and embrace Christ as his Savior.

This narrative is a narrative of grace, sovereign, powerful, overwhelming grace. Though the struggle within is genuine, it is clear that Augustine knew that on his own he would never be able to conquer his sinful nature. He was trapped in a cycle of depravity and despair. He needed *outside* intervention because within him there dwelt no good thing. This came through the mysterious voice of the child, the reading of God's word, and the subjective work of the Holy Spirit, and Augustine is careful to emphasize in his ongoing prayer to God in the *Confessions* that it is God who converted him. It was not a cooperative exercise. It was a miraculous, undeserved intervention of God in his life that finally broke the power of sin and turned him away from seeking meaning in himself to finding his true meaning in God.

Intuitive Grace

The *Confessions* gives us the story of grace. I have known many Christian brothers and sisters who reject the idea of God's sovereign grace in election, yet when they pray, they call on God to intervene decisively in the lives of unbelieving relatives and friends so as to bring them to faith. Even Charles Wesley, a committed opponent of all things Calvinist, wrote in his great hymn "And Can It Be" that "my chains fell off, my heart was free." Where is the free will in this? One might cavil at this and argue that Wesley assumed a prevenient grace that enabled a free choice. But chains falling off? These experiences speak of a sovereign work of divine intervention in the prisoner's life, one that is beyond any power the prisoner himself may have or merely have been offered.

What Augustine does in the *Confessions* is something similar. He describes and interprets his experience in an intuitive way, and it is precisely this intuitive character of his theology in the *Confessions* that created the later storm of the Pelagian controversy. The statement in the *Confessions* that triggered that controversy, to which we will turn in the next chapter, was this: "Give what you command and command what you will." This statement, taken by itself, is not unusual. It is one of many petitions that the work contains, as the whole *Confessions* is an extended prayer, but it captures the essence of Augustine's theology of grace. God is sovereign, and he commands what he wishes of his creatures. However, as fallen humans trapped in sin, this implies that God must also provide them with the ability to do these things.

The phrase occurs four times in book 10, as Augustine is reflecting on the fundamental reorientation of his life to God's grace. In the first two instances, he is speaking about the requirement of sexual continence with his acceptance of the catholic faith. There is a note of anxiety in the

passage, intensified by the fact that the statement occurs at both the beginning and the end of the short chapter, thus framing his declaration that his only hope is in the great mercy of God.[18] The third occurrence is in 10.31, where the subject is gluttony in food and drink. Here Augustine notes that drunkenness has never been a serious problem for him, but he has wrestled with excess in eating. Again, he calls out to God to give him the strength to resist such temptation. God is the author of his transformation; Augustine is the one who will experience the struggle to resist. Divine sovereignty and human responsibility go hand in hand.

The fourth mention of the phrase is found in 10.37, where Augustine is wrestling with the deeper, psychological sins associated with love of praise. He confesses that there is no empirical measure by which he can tell whether he is truly freed of such sin or not. With sex or with riches or with gluttony he can judge his own behavior, but he has no idea how to measure his pride. His knowledge of the nature of sin here leads to self-doubt, and again he cries out to the Lord in his helplessness: "Command what you will and give what you command."

Here we can see that Augustine is rooting his transformation in the sovereign, unmerited favor and action of God. In the writings of Paul we find that grace sometimes refers to the power of God in sanctifying the individual and in bringing about practical change in lives (see the financial generosity of the Macedonians to which Paul refers in 2 Cor 8). Here Augustine intuitively understands that God's grace makes him dependent on the Lord for the Lord's favor and for the power to resist temptations. His existential struggle continues even after conversion, and the battle to slay his self-sufficiency and rest on the sufficiency of God's act continues.

Conclusion: Augustine and Christians Today

I've offered a brief introduction to the seminal thinking of Augustine in his *Confessions*, but what can Christians today learn from this that will help us in our lives and in our churches? Augustine's thought continues to shape Christian thinking up to this present day, yet it is his teaching on sin and grace as developed in the *Confessions* that still draws out so marvelously the practical, existential issues of grace. Many pastors love theology, but it is the daily experience of life that cuts closest for many believers. They have to confront the world every day, and theology that seems abstract and remote is of little use to them. This is where Augustine's story is so timeless. For example, Augustine's treatments of the theft of the pears and of Alypius's experience at the circus are still highly instructive for us today. The pears incident allows us to reflect on why one sin is never enough. We see that the content of the sin is not ultimately what gives us pleasure; it is that sin is transgression of God's law. Sin allows me to think that I might be God, and for a brief moment I define the meaning of my own existence. But one theft or visit to the circus is not enough. Sin has an insatiable appetite.

This helps when we consider one of the most disturbing phenomena in the contemporary church: the use of internet pornography. Similar to the story of Alypius and the circus, pornographic images supply powerful aesthetic stimulation and temporarily give us a sense of godlike powers, yet they fail to satisfy. They must be repeated again and again. Augustine's analysis of sin reminds us that the issue is not simply physical lust; instead, lust is symptomatic of much deeper human problems. More deeply, the problem is a matter of human identity and of our wicked aspirations to be God. And Augustine reminds us that the answer is ultimately God's grace—God's action and our dependence on that action.

Part of the usefulness of Augustine on grace derives from the way his thinking has since been appropriated by seventeenth-century philosopher and theologian Blaise Pascal (1623–62). Pascal picked up Augustine's teaching on love and sin and used it to great effect to understand the psychology of human behavior. In *Thoughts*, a fragmentary, aphoristic work that remained unfinished at his death, Pascal reflects on why, for example, kings have jesters. Why does the most powerful man in the nation, a man who lacks for nothing, have a fool to entertain him? Pascal's answer is simple: the man who has nothing to worry about has only one thing left to worry about, namely, his own mortality. And the jester distracts him from that.[19]

Pascal sees the same rationale at work in all of our human activity, from excessive bureaucracy to so much of the frenetic activity that fills our lives and yet accomplishes so little of any value. Human sin is rooted in a desire to be immortal, like God, and it leads us to ignore and suppress any and every piece of evidence to the contrary. This is what drives our fallen human psychology. We are made a little lower than the angels, and we aspire to be much higher than they.

Pascal was writing about the court of Louis XIV, but his analysis applies as much to our day as to seventeenth-century France. Today we see entertainers—actors, athletes, and celebrities—who are among the highest-paid and most influential people in our world. In the West, we have witnessed the triumph of the trivial. We are a distracted people, distracting ourselves from the truth that our fallen natures cannot bear, that we are not God and that it is appointed to us once to die and then to face the judgment.[20]

What Augustine and his later disciple Pascal do is reveal the depth of the human problem and point us to the psychology that undergirds fallen human culture. They remind us that the problems we face in our churches and in our individual lives are not ones that can be solved by mastering new and better techniques or simply by learning more information. We need more than how-to manuals and life coaches. We need grace: sovereign, free, powerful, and active grace. And we need those who proclaim that grace fearlessly and faithfully.

Augustine's narrative gives us an intuitive sense of how sin works and how we experience its effect. But we need more than subjective experience to define the problem. We need doctrinal precision. And we find that—a more precise and objective doctrinal foundation—as we look at the Pelagian controversy.

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1. B. B. Warfield, *Studies in Tertullian and Augustine*, Works of Benjamin B. Warfield 4 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930), 130.

2. The best scholarly but very readable biography of Augustine is that by Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2013). First published in 1968, it remains a standard work. A good introduction is the short biography by Garry Wills, *Saint Augustine: A Life* (New York: Penguin, 2005). Also Wills's "biography" of Augustine's autobiography, *Augustine's "Confessions": A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), is a very interesting study of the work and its reception through the ages.

3. E.g., see 1 Clement 1 and 65; cf. Polycarp, *To the Philippians* 14; Martyrdom of Polycarp 20; Ignatius, *To the Ephesians* 21. Various editions of the Apostolic Fathers are available. Bishop Lightfoot's classic translation can be accessed at www.ccel.org/ccel/lightfoot/fathers.html.

4. Polycarp, *To the Philippians* 1.

5. See, for example, Athanasius's work *On the Incarnation*, where the language of grace is primarily focused on the work of the incarnate Christ.

6. Augustine, *Confessions* 1.1.

7. Ibid., 1.6.

8. Ibid., 2.4 (translation from W. Watts in the Loeb Classical Library [London: Heinemann, 1912], 1:77–79).

9. Augustine, *Confessions* 3.1 (Watts, LCL).

10. Augustine, *Confessions* 6.8 (Watts, LCL).

11. Norman Doidge, "Acquiring Tastes and Loves: What Neuroplasticity Teaches Us about Sexual Attraction and Love," in *The Social Costs of Pornography: A Collection of Papers*, ed. James R. Stoner Jr. and Donna M. Hughes (Princeton: Witherspoon Institute, 2010), Kindle location 675–1317.

12. "Platonism" is the term used to refer to the tradition of philosophy that took its cue from the thought and writings of Athenian philosopher Plato (ca. 428–348 BCE). One of its main tenets was that truth was not to be found in the material world of flux and change in which we live but in a world of unchanging, immaterial ideals. One practical result of this was that those influenced by Platonism often tended to take a low view of the material world, and this, in turn, sometimes led them to emphasize ascetic practices and self-denial.

13. Augustine, *Confessions* 7.21.

14. See Wills, *Augustine's Confessions*.

15. The postconversion Augustine did take a very dim view of sexual intercourse, something which may well have been the result of an overreaction to his earlier lifestyle and/or the impact of a residual Platonism on his thinking.

16. Augustine, *Confessions* 8.5; 1:429 (Watts, LCL).

17. A. E. Houseman, "The Welsh Marches," *A Shropshire Lad* (London: Folio Society, 2014), 40–41.

18. Augustine, *Confessions* 10.29.

19. Blaise Pascal, *Pascal's Thoughts*, trans. W. F. Trotter (Hoboken, NJ: Generic NL Freebook), 27.

20. For more on this point, see David VanDrunen, *God's Glory Alone: The Majestic Heart of the Christian Faith and Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 109–30.

CHAPTER 3
Grace Contested: Augustine versus Pelagius

> In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.
>
> *Ephesians 1:4–6*

As we saw with Augustine, those aspects of Christian theology that have the most immediate existential impact are often grasped intuitively before we learn to articulate them in the more precise categories of Christian discourse. I knew that I was a sinner and needed a Savior who was God himself long before I was able to express what that meant in a finely tooled doctrine of original sin or had read the Creed of Nicaea. I had a vision of the glory of the Christ who is God and man before I knew the terms expressed by the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Theology cannot be reduced to our experience or to religious psychology—the fundamental error of liberalism—but we cannot deny that for most people our experience of grace precedes a full and rigorous understanding of grace.

In the *Confessions,* we saw how Augustine offers us the first great postbiblical first-person narrative of God's grace in the life of the soul. It's not a work of biblical exegesis or systematic theology but a personal testimony, suffused with Bible verses and theological reflections. As with all attempts at autobiography, there is some systematizing at work as he seeks to find or impose an order on his story to give it a narrative with some theological coherence. But it is no systematic theology. It is a prayer. It is a confession of sin and personal faith, constructed to bring glory to God and instruction to those who read it or hear it read. Augustine is tracing the work of God in his life and in terms of his sin and God's grace.

The late fourth century was not a time of easy access to books. Levels of literacy were rather low, and for a book to have a wide impact it needed to be read out loud, publicly performed in front of others. And that's what happened with Augustine's story. Today we might go to the cinema or to the theater, but in Augustine's day the theologically engaged went to a public reading.

At one of these events in the early years of the fifth century, there was a member of the audience named Pelagius, a Welsh monk. His exposure to the *Confessions* was a momentous occasion that triggered a bitter theological controversy. Augustine himself gives an account of this famous incident in chapter 53 of a later work, *On the Gift of Perseverance*:

> And which of my smaller works has been able to be more generally and more agreeably known than the books of my *Confessions*? And although I published them before the Pelagian heresy had come into existence, certainly in them I said to my God, and said it frequently, "Give what Thou commandest, and command what Thou willest." Which words of mine, Pelagius at Rome, when they were mentioned in his presence by a certain brother and fellow-bishop of mine, could not bear; and contradicting somewhat too excitedly, nearly came to a quarrel with him who had mentioned them. But what, indeed, does God primarily and chiefly command, but that we believe on Him? And this, therefore, He Himself gives, if it is well said to Him, "Give what Thou commandest." And, moreover, in those same books, in respect of what I have related concerning my conversion, when God converted me to that faith which, with a most miserable and raging talkativeness, I was destroying, do you not remember that it was so narrated how I showed that I was granted to the faithful and daily tears of my mother, that I should not perish? Where certainly I declared that God by His grace converted to the true faith the wills of men, which were not only averse to it, but even adverse to it.[1]

This was the encounter that started what we now know as the Pelagian controversy, a controversy that is fundamental to all future discussions of grace. This conflict forced Augustine to offer deeper exegetical and systematic foundations for the intuitive understandings of grace he had put forth in the *Confessions*. In doing so, he clarified what was really at stake, laying down the basic framework for later medieval, Reformation, and post-Reformation arguments on this issue. Perhaps not until the work of Karl Barth was a true attempt made to overthrow the Augustinian structure of the discussion, and even Barth is largely reacting against—and thus still dependent on—the classic Augustinian heritage.

The Context of the Controversy

If grace represents a response by God to the plight of sinful humanity, how one understands grace lies at the heart of what one understands the Christian life to be. If one believes that humanity's problem is simply ignorance of how to live, then we can assume that grace is education to alleviate such ignorance. We might identify grace with a book of rules or a manual of ethics that God specially reveals to cut through innate human ignorance.

Grace also relates to the authenticity of Christianity, whether it is real and genuine. If our human problem is simply moral ignorance, and grace is moral revelation, the Christian life would consist of men and women being obedient in their own strength to the revealed moral code. God shows us what to do, and we find the will to do it. Under such a system, Augustine's claim that God should command what he will is not a problem. God has every right to demand that we live moral lives. But it is the second clause—that he should give what he commands—that proves problematic. Why? Because this statement seems to place both the responsibility for revealing true morality and for the individual's obedient response squarely on the shoulders of God himself. We should not be surprised that many people felt that a theology like this was nothing but an excuse for moral laxity. That was how Pelagius understood it. To him, Augustine was providing a rationale for moral mediocrity.

We forget that this was not a minor squabble but a ferocious debate. To grasp this, we need to

understand something of the nature of the fifth-century world. For the first two centuries of its existence, the Christian church had been marginally connected to Roman society. Christians were mocked and derided by the intelligentsia and subject to sporadic local persecutions. By the middle of the third century, however, Christianity was growing into a significant force, and a number of empire-wide persecutions occurred at the hands of emperors worried that it would lead to sedition and undermine the established order.

Culturally, the church responded by setting forth the idea of the martyr, the one who suffers for his faith, as an aspirational ideal. The ancient world often placed a high value on asceticism. This did not mean that many aspired to be ascetics but that those who lived an ascetic life were often seen as special, wise, or elite. The lives of philosophers such as Pythagoras or Diogenes would emphasize this aspect of their biography as a way of pointing to their integrity. In such a world, Christianity's early emphasis on physical suffering and even death for the faith would have spoken eloquently even to pagans who did not share the faith.

Then, suddenly, all of this changed for Christianity. At the start of the fourth century, Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and set in motion a century of struggle for ideological control of the empire. The old gods of paganism battled, and slowly lost ground, to the God of the Christians. The most obvious result of this change was that Christianity became, for want of a better term, a whole lot *easier*. Indeed, part of the attraction of Christianity for the empire was the number of adherents it had and the administrative structure it possessed. As the empire Christianized, Christianity no longer was the difficult or dangerous option. It was now the easy and at times advantageous one.

Times of massive cultural change for Christianity always raise the question of what a true Christian looks like. In America in the twenty-first century, we see the church rapidly changing to a marginal role within society. Issues of Christian identity and behavior in this new world dominate many of the headlines in the Christian press. But it was the opposite experience in the fourth century. Christianity had been on the sidelines and was now respectable. Yet the challenges to identity were just as fierce. How could a movement whose aspirational ideal was suffering and martyrdom continue now that Christianity was rapidly moving from the political and cultural margins at the start of the fourth century toward being the official religion of the empire by its end?

One option was monasticism. The fourth century saw the rapid rise of the monastic movement, inspired by the lives of ascetics such as Anthony and visionaries such as Pachomius. The monastic ideal of self-denial and physical and mental asceticism made Christianity a valiant and difficult calling, even as the world around monasticism came to accept the church and led to a softening of the faith.

It was in this context that the clash between Pelagius and Augustine erupted. It was more than a pedantic debate between two theologians; rather, it represented a clash between two views of what it means to be a Christian and to live a Christian life. At the heart of the debate were fundamentally different conceptions of grace. To put it simply: Was the Christian life primarily one of vigorous, disciplined, ascetic effort? Or was it, to use deliberately provocative terminology, one of moral mediocrity, in which constant failure might be excused?[2]

The Course of the Controversy

The issues at stake in the debate—sin, grace, predestination—are perennials of Christian controversy. So it's no surprise that the battle between them has rumbled on down through the ages with those who have tended toward one side or the other continuing to battle for the soul of the church. For now, we'll focus on the ancient controversy itself as seen through the life of Augustine.

The earliest years of debate were from 411 to 418 CE, and they exhibit a certain amount of chaos. In 411, a synod in Carthage condemned Pelagius's colleague, Caelestius, yet in 415 the Synod of Diospolis exonerated Pelagius from accusations of false teaching. Then, two years later, the situation became even more confusing. In January, the then-bishop of Rome, Innocent I, condemned both Pelagius and Caelestius. Nine months later, his successor, Zosimus, rehabilitated them. Then, in May 418, a council in Carthage condemned both men, and this time Zosimus switched sides, confirming the condemnations. What is clear in all of this is that the church had not fully reflected on the notion of grace and was being forced to some quick conclusions. All of this threatened to cause serious division.

After 418 Augustine was more engaged and went head-to-head with Julian of Eclanum, the most brilliant of the early Pelagian thinkers. In this phase of the debate, the key issues discussed were the goodness of marriage, the nature of life before the fall, the origin of the soul, and the nature and transmission of original sin, as well as the matter of predestination. Augustine, by this point, had elaborated on his intuitive theology in the *Confessions,* developing it into a complex of doctrines.

Human Freedom: The Key Issue

The key issue in the debate between Augustine and the Pelagians was freedom. For Pelagius, if Christianity was to be a religion of merit, it was necessary that human beings after the fall be free in the sense that they were ultimately responsible for their own actions. He saw the Christian life as one in which Christ was a great example, and Christianity largely involved following him as a paradigm for life. The grace of God had a threefold reference. First, it was the forgiveness of past sins.[3] Second, it was the endowment of human freedom, the ability of human beings to recognize and obey God if they wished.[4] Third, it was the revelation of what that activity should look like.[5] This included the sacred Scriptures given to us as law. The Pauline notion of Adam and Christ as the archetypes of all humanity meant that they were not representative heads for all humanity, but rather bad and good examples of what human beings should do.[6]

The theology underlying Augustine's prayer that God should "command what you will, and give what you command!" rests on a very different view of human freedom. For Augustine, the human problem was the lack of freedom since Adam's fall. Augustine agreed that Adam was created with free will, though this will was not quite the same as how we think of free will today. Today free will typically connotes the ability to choose between alternatives *a* or *b* without interference (i.e., libertarian freedom).[7] I might choose to visit Philadelphia this Saturday, or I might choose to stay at home. The decision is mine, uncoerced by any external force.

If we move this question of freedom into the context of moral action, we can perhaps see Pelagius's concern. For him, human beings could freely choose to follow God on the basis of what he had revealed of himself. By implication, this meant that they could also freely choose not to do so. Augustine, however, takes a different approach. For him, human freedom before the fall (like that of the angels) had an intrinsic, moral quality. Not only did Adam have a free and upright will, Adam

also possessed as a gift from God the ability not to sin. Unfallen human freedom was only properly exercised when Adam clung in love to God, as a creature should. The freedom of the human will can only be properly considered when it is set in the context for which human beings were designed—our unfallen state.

According to Augustine, grace now makes the fallen will free again by instilling in it a love of righteousness:

> For neither is the law fulfilled except by free will; but by the law is the knowledge of sin, by faith the acquisition of grace against sin, by grace the healing of the soul from the disease of sin, by the health of the soul freedom of will, by free will the love of righteousness, by love of righteousness the accomplishment of the law.[8]

This notion of freedom sounds strange to those raised in a culture in which we embrace a more libertarian concept of freedom. We think of freedom in terms of our own autonomy, but Augustine pushes back, saying that the will is truly free when it chooses to love God. As soon as Adam failed to do that and chose another ultimate love, his will was less free.

When thinking of Augustinian freedom, we should set aside libertarian notions and think first of all in terms of how a thing is designed. For example, a fish that uses its physical capabilities to beach itself on the shore will die. As a creature, a fish is not truly free when it does this. By acting in a way contrary to its design, it destroys itself. In Augustine's theology Adam's decision to disobey God is something he is able to do and for which he is responsible. But it is an act that destroys his freedom, not one that demonstrates or enhances it.

Once fallen, Adam's will (and those of his descendants) remained free in the ordinary sense that he was able to choose how to act. But this freedom was now limited, oriented away from God and toward self, toward seeing the satisfying of oneself and one's needs as the purpose of life. Adam acts freely in that he is not subject to external coercion, but now he always acts sinfully. His will always tends toward love of self rather than love of God and is enslaved to sin. Like a fish flopping on the beach, every action he chooses only leads to his inevitable death.

Original Sin

The Pelagian controversy sharpened Augustine's thinking on original sin, and though some of the nuanced points are contested in Augustine scholarship, there is agreement on certain basics. Augustine believed that corporate human nature after Adam's fall inherited ignorance concerning what is good. He saw that human desire and love was now directed toward the self rather than toward God (concupiscence). He saw all human beings as guilty and condemned in Adam. And he spent a great deal of his theology thinking about death. These themes dominate our fallen human existence, and in his reading of Romans 5:12, Augustine, more than anyone since Paul, saw Adam as existentially and morally pivotal for all subsequent humanity.[9]

Augustine held to a twofold transmission of our ignorance, inward desire (concupiscence) and death. One is the physiological aspect because all human beings are descended bodily from Adam and thus have a seminal solidarity with him. This grounds the juridical fact that all his descendants

are condemned by his sin. There is also a psychological unity whereby the disorder that is Adam's concupiscence is shared by his descendants too. Augustine believed that this concupiscence was probably passed on by sexual procreation, although procreation itself is not sinful, for it would still have been the means of replicating the human race had Adam not fallen. However, after the fall, he believed, it was irremediably scarred by sin.

The nature of the transmission of original sin has been debated by theologians for years. Reformed theologians argue on the basis of Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15 for a federal, or covenantal, understanding of Adam that does not emphasize the physical aspects of the transmission of original sin. Adam represents humanity as, say, the president of the United States represents all Americans in the decisions he makes in his office as head of state and commander in chief. This is arguably a better way of understanding Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15 than that proposed by Augustine.

Yet we should give Augustine credit. He makes clear that our human problem is not a matter of following a bad example. In Pelagian theology, human beings sin in Adam by following his bad example, and the relation between my sin and that of the first man is that he loved himself rather than God, and I subsequently follow his example by choosing to do the same. The problem is primarily external.

Augustine's great insight, intuitive in the *Confessions* and explicit in the anti-Pelagian writings, is that sin is far more radical. It is something that is *inherent* in human beings after the fall. To have sinned in Adam is not simply to have followed a poor example. It is to be subject to a fundamental change in the human relationship to God and to self. It involves a corruption of human nature that came about directly as a result of Adam disobeying God. I love myself rather than God, am ignorant of the good, and I will die because of the actions of Adam long ago in the garden of Eden, confirmed here and now by my own twisted psychology and inability to love God as I should.

Grace as Transformative

Against this background Augustine works out his understanding of grace. Grace is always the counterpoint to the problem of sin, and how one understands the latter is decisive for one's thinking on the former. For a Pelagian, sin is primarily something external, so grace is primarily external (e.g., the example of Christ, the law). Our problem is moral ignorance, not innate moral depravity.

For Augustine, sin is deeply embedded in human nature, so grace must go all the way down. Human beings have a problem: they need to love God but cannot do so in their own power, and this problem must be resolved in two ways. Human nature must be both healed *and* restored, and that healing and restoration must originate outside ourselves, for men and women are trapped in a death spiral of self-love. The human predicament demands grace both as the content and as the overall framework of salvation. We might describe these—content and framework respectively—as the active work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer, and the predestination to grace of the believer.

As to the first, Augustine agrees with the Pelagians that the giving of the law is important, for it shows human beings their peril and the reality of their condition. But knowing the law is not enough. Because of the internal, existential problem of human sin, Augustine argued that the internal work of the Holy Spirit is also vital. It is the Spirit who writes the law on the heart of the sinner, something

for which Augustine sees obvious biblical justification in Jeremiah 31:33.[10] Augustine draws this out dramatically in his work *On the Spirit and the Letter* when he compares the Israelites gathered at Sinai to the disciples gathered together at Pentecost:

> Now, amidst this admirable correspondence, there is at least this very considerable diversity in the cases, in that the people in the earlier instance were deterred by a horrible dread from approaching the place where the law was given; whereas in the other case the Holy Ghost came upon them who were gathered together in expectation of His promised gift. *There* it was on tables of stone that the finger of God operated; *here* it was on the hearts of men. *There* the law was given outwardly, so that the unrighteous might be terrified; *here* it was given inwardly, so that they might be justified.[11]

Here the Spirit transforms both the sinner and the law by internalizing the latter. "Command what you will, and give what you command!" That intuitive cry in the *Confessions* now finds its theological expression in Augustine's understanding of God's grace, here focused on the work of the Holy Spirit in writing the law on the hearts of sinners.[12] It is this work of the Spirit that makes the external law able to address the most fundamental problem of humanity, the internal and psychological consequences of sin. The Spirit works subjectively in the life of Christians to renovate them and to bring them back to the path of true freedom.

But why is it that some people are beneficiaries of this supernatural work of the Spirit, while others are not? There is clearly a discriminating factor at work in the way in which this grace is distributed, and this brings us to the topic of predestination.

Predestination

Augustine had done some written reflection on grace and predestination prior to the Pelagian controversy. In 396/97 he wrote a work, *To Simplicianus*, in which he prioritized grace over free will. The collapse of free will caused by Adam's fall meant that human beings could no longer turn to God in their own strength. Salvation was only possible at God's initiative. In the course of this discussion, Augustine cites Romans 9 and argues that God's choice of Jacob over Esau was not based on foreseen merits but on his own autonomous decision, the reasons for which defied human comprehension (i.e., unconditional election).[13]

Augustine's understanding of the human predicament was that through Adam we are now all bound in sin, incapable of loving God as we should, and doomed to perish in our mortal bodies. This meant that under the polemical pressure of the Pelagian controversy he had to also clarify the second dimension of grace: the overall eternal framework. As a result, he came slowly but surely to articulate an understanding of predestination that continues to dominate much of our Christian discussion of salvation today. Augustine's interpretation of Paul's thinking in Romans has been foundational to all subsequent Western discussions of grace.

Augustine uses a number of arguments to establish his case. In *On Grace and Free Will*, he points out that believers pray for the conversion of unbelievers, which implies that God is able to graciously give it to them.[14] He reinforces the gift nature of grace by indicating that grace is not preceded by

good works but by evil ones, which flow from the wickedness of the human heart. If the apportioning of grace were based on human merit, then nobody would receive it.[15]

Even more explicit are the statements he makes in *A Treatise on Rebuke and Grace*. He writes:

> Whosoever, then, are made to differ from that original condemnation by such bounty of divine grace, there is no doubt but that for such it is provided that they should hear the gospel, and when they hear they believe, and in the faith which worketh by love they persevere unto the end; and if, perchance, they deviate from the way, when they are rebuked they are amended; and some of them, although they may not be rebuked by men, return into the path which they had left; and some who have received grace in any age whatever are withdrawn from the perils of this life by swiftness of death. For He worketh all these things in them who made them vessels of mercy, who also elected them in His Son before the foundation of the world by the election of grace: "And if by grace, then is it no more of works, otherwise grace is no more grace." For they were not so called as not to be elected, in respect of which it is said, "For many are called but few are elected"; but because they were called according to the purpose, they are of a certainty also elected by the election, as it is said, of grace, not of any precedent merits of theirs, because to them grace is all merit.[16]

Here he is wrestling with the standard criticism made against the anti-Pelagian notion of grace, namely that it makes human action (here, pastoral disciplinary action) useless. Augustine disagrees, arguing that God uses means, but the divine decision to elect someone is what guarantees the success of those means. As he goes on to argue in the very next chapter, none of the predestined can perish.

In fact, Augustine often noted that the success of preaching depends on God's grace and thus ultimately on predestination. What later Protestantism called a *means of* grace, the preaching of the word, is only a means of grace because God has willed to attach his saving action to it. Only because God has decided to be gracious to someone does the proclamation of the word then work faith within them and build them up in that same faith.[17]

As a side note, I believe this teaching is of great practical relevance to all pastors. If you preach regularly (or listen to preaching regularly), you should find this to be a very reassuring doctrine. If I believed that the power of my sermons to change human hearts, to bring unbelievers to Christ, and believers to maturity in Christ, rested on my eloquence or my learning or my powers of persuasion or my own moral perfections, I would be driven to despair. If congregants thought that the power of the word to transform them depended on the ability of the preacher, or on his own moral qualities, they would also despair. The preacher and the congregants need to know that God is overwhelmingly powerful and will do what he will do. This is theology that inspires confidence in ministers and in congregations.

Romans 9, particularly the section on Jacob and Esau, plays a key role in Augustine's discussions (as in all Christian attempts to wrestle with predestination). In *On Predestination*, Augustine cites the Romans 9 passage to acknowledge his own previous error, an error he says he held prior to becoming a bishop and from which he was cured in part by a saying of Cyprian, that "we must boast in nothing, since nothing is our own."[18] Back then, he mistakenly believed the election of Jacob was based on

God's foreknowledge of his future faith (i.e., conditional election). He thought that faith preceded grace, which built on the prior acceptance of God by the individual. He ascribes this view to a lack of thought and theological carelessness, for he had not yet realized that faith itself was one of the gifts that God sovereignly gives to his people.[19]

This early view of Augustine is not unusual and still quite common today. The idea that we make the key decision and God assists us in bringing that decision to a fruitful end is perennially popular. Positively, it seems to preserve both human responsibility and divine grace. Yet it fails to recognize, as Augustine saw, that faith itself is a work of God's grace. This was a key point that Luther pressed in a dramatic form in his clash with Erasmus in 1525, as we shall see again in chapter five.

In another work, *Against Two Letters of the Pelagians*, Augustine refers to the example of Isaac's sons three times. First, he argues that the case of Jacob and Esau is instructive because Paul refuses to solve the issue of God's discrimination between them according to human criteria. Augustine leaves the matter unresolved, pushing it back into the unsearchable wisdom of God, which human beings should not presume to question.[20] This is a helpful point to remember because discussion of predestination can tend to be highly speculative at times. We are curious about such things, and, when faced with a doctrine that presses very hard against our innate notions of godlikeness, we speculate. What Augustine sees is that the Pauline approach to predestination resolves the problem doxologically but not theologically. There are myriad questions that crowd into our minds when we read Romans 9. And Paul pointedly does not answer these questions. Indeed, they cannot be answered in a direct fashion because he is speaking of a mystery that lies deep in the mind of God himself and is only very partially revealed to us, his creatures. Instead, Paul drives his readers back to the praise of God, precisely because the rationale for election is unfathomable and unsearchable. A retreat to mystery in theological discussion can sometimes be an excuse to avoid hard thinking on a matter, but when Augustine does so in his reflections on Romans 9, he is merely following where Paul's argument leads. Perhaps we should do the same. God's grace, his loving and mysterious response to our rebellion, should inspire praise and worship first and foremost.

The second reference to Esau and Jacob happens as Augustine highlights an inconsistency in Pelagian thinking. Augustine points out that if Pelagians wish to argue that Esau was condemned on the basis of foreknown sin, then what do we say of twins when one dies in infancy and the other reaches adulthood?[21] For Augustine, this scenario begs an explanation. Since the Pelagians deny original sin, the death of the infant cannot be a consequence of his own sin. Yet it is surely profoundly unjust to condemn someone on the basis of sins that they have not yet committed. Critics of Augustine's view of predestination might say that his approach is unfair by human standards, but in this instance it is the Pelagian position that is vulnerable. The only conclusion can be that God wills to discriminate between the two based solely on his own autonomous decision in eternity.[22]

A Pelagian might respond that the dead infant, not having sinned and not being condemned by original sin, is translated straight to paradise. But such an argument merely transfers the problems elsewhere. If all dead infants go to heaven, is it then in any meaningful sense just to let one live, so that she might lose her salvation and bring judgment on herself by later sins? Would infant death not be much better, guaranteeing a place in heaven? And what of death anyway? If it is a penalty for sin, why does an innocent infant suffer it?[23]

Pastorally, of course, infant deaths are among some of the most difficult problems a minister has

to handle. But Augustine is not looking at this question from a pastoral perspective. He is simply using it to highlight the problems associated with a Pelagian view.

Augustine's third reference to Jacob and Esau occurs in a passage where he is emphasizing that the grace of God working in the lives of believers is rooted in the prior, gracious decision of God.[24] This goes to the heart of Augustine's concern, since his interest in the topic is driven by his desire to ensure that salvation is by grace—that free, unmerited favor of God. Many of the more speculative questions that came to be associated with later strands of anti-Pelagian tradition are absent from his writings or only present in a very embryonic form.

Predestination and Preaching

Augustine scholar Peter Sanlon notes that the doctrine of predestination was rarely preached by Augustine, and when he did mention it he generally avoided elaborating on it. Instead, he stressed the need to prove one's election through offering hospitality.[25] This is consonant with Augustine's observations about the preaching of Cyprian and Ambrose, where he notes that they used the doctrine to underscore the gratuity of grace alongside the need to take the imperatives of grace seriously.[26]

Preaching on predestination remains difficult today, of course. The challenge is doing justice to the biblical teaching while avoiding excessive speculation and addressing pastoral problems such as a lack of assurance or unwarranted presumption. Augustine's basic point is that predestination undergirds the sovereignty of God's grace and places all of our works in the context of that prior decision. Paul's own teaching consistently grounds the imperatives of the Christian life, what we must do, in the indicatives of God's revelation, what he has done and still does on our behalf. It takes a robust understanding of God's grace grounded in predestination to do justice to this basic structure, and when we come to the time of the Reformation, we see that the Reformers take this doctrine a step further in their application, using it to undergird the believer's assurance of faith.

Grace after Augustine

Augustine outlived Pelagius, but he died in 430 while the conflict with Pelagius's most brilliant successor, Julian of Eclanum, was still raging on. Still, the range and power of Augustine's intellect and literary output ensured that he was the victor in their battle. The doctrinal war continued, of course. A key moment after Augustine's death came at the Second Council of Orange (529). Fourteen bishops met, with Caesarius, bishop of Arles, presiding, and approved a series of statements affirming the teaching of Augustine and another father, Prosper of Aquitaine, over against resurgent semi-Pelagianism.[27] The council issued twenty-five canons that upheld the doctrines of original sin and the priority of God's grace, and while the canons do not develop an elaborate understanding of predestination and did not affirm irresistible grace, the basic thrust of the council's position on grace is clear from canon 6:

> If anyone says that mercy is divinely conferred upon us when, without God's grace, we believe, will, desire, strive, labor, pray, keep watch, endeavor, request, seek, knock, but does not confess that it is through the infusion and inspiration of the Holy Spirit that we believe, will, or are able to do all these things as is required; or if anyone subordinates

> the help of grace to humility or human obedience and does not admit that it is the very gift of grace that makes us obedient and humble, one contradicts the apostle, who says: What have you that you did not receive? [1 Cor 4:7]; and also: By the grace of God I am what I am [1 Cor 15:10].[28]

This statement from the council is entirely consistent with Augustine's position and should have set a clear boundary for medieval reflection on grace within a broadly Augustinian framework. The conclusions of the council, however, do not appear to have played any significant part in later medieval discussion.

In fact, Augustine's legacy on the doctrines of grace was rather mixed. Medieval Catholicism continued to exhibit great diversity on the matter of grace, embracing both Augustinian and what could be called "semi-Pelagian" positions. In part this was the result of the way in which Augustine's works were transmitted. In an era when the lack of printing technology made book production a complicated and expensive matter, few people had access to complete texts. More common were the florilegia and books of sentences, which were composed of thematically ordered quotations. The most famous of these, Peter Lombard's *Four Books of Sentences*, was produced in the twelfth century and became the dominant theological textbook in the West. The problem was that quotations are statements taken out of their original textual context and prone to ambiguity in meaning. So while Augustine's thought remained a standard source for medieval thinking, the meaning of what he had written and argued was frequently lost. No medieval theologian—even those we would regard as semi-Pelagian in bent—would have considered themselves to be deviant from Augustine on the issue of grace. They simply did not grasp what Augustine had written and taught on that subject.

By the ninth century a controversy had exploded over the subject of predestination that in many ways repeated the controversies of the fifth century. This time, Augustine was being cited on both sides of the issue. Theologian Gottschalk of Orbais advocated a strong and clear doctrine of double predestination, the belief that God both chooses the elect and rejects the rest. While this doctrine is arguably present in Augustine at certain points, it was never a matter of great emphasis for him. In Gottschalk and his appropriation of Augustine it became a key doctrine. Gottschalk's views were condemned as heretical at the Council of Mainz in 848, and he was shortly thereafter imprisoned until his death, around 868.[29]

One of the theologians commissioned to refute Gottschalk was Irishman John Scotus Eriugena. Eriugena advocated a view of predestination that held that God has a universal will to save all and that human beings damn themselves by their own actions. Human beings were created rational and free and remain so even after the fall. During the course of his work *On Predestination*, he cites Augustine but fails to capture the essentials of Augustine's thought.[30]

I mention the Gottschalk-Eriugena debate to illustrate some of the confusion that persisted over the teaching of Augustine throughout the early Middle Ages. These are, of course, deep waters and complicated historical and doctrinal matters, but we should not assume that Augustine's thought in its purest form had become the default position of the church. Nor should we suppose that the advocates and interpreters of Augustine were always faithful to his position. Some Protestants, including Luther himself, believed the medieval church to be a monochrome bastion of semi-Pelagianism. But this simply is not true. There have always been advocates of a Pauline-Augustinian notion of grace, even

in the Middle Ages.

Conclusion

During the time of the Reformation, there were many reasons why Protestants wanted to claim Augustine. B. B. Warfield summed it well when he wrote, "The Reformation, inwardly considered, was just the ultimate triumph of Augustine's doctrine of grace over Augustine's doctrine of the Church."[31] And there is a practical lesson here for evangelical Protestants today as well. We must remember that our faith is rooted in history and has roots beyond the year 1517. While we may be familiar with the struggles between Wesley and Whitefield or, in our own day, between Calvinists and Arminians, we should not see these as isolated incidents but as the latest in an ongoing debate that has occurred throughout the centuries. We need to appreciate the central role of Augustine in all of this, and particularly his anti-Pelagian writings.

We may wonder: Where was the church before the Reformation? Certainly, the Reformers themselves wrestled with this question. If God works in and through the church in history, then what authority or genealogy can the Reformers claim for their churches? One popular answer at the time of the Reformation (and since) is that the trail of blood establishes our ancestry. The true church has always been persecuted, and we should look for the long line of martyrs throughout history to find how God has brought us to the present.

Such an approach has its attractions, and it proved popular at the time of the Reformation, as evidenced by John Foxe's massive account of the history of martyrdom, *Acts and Monuments*.[32] But it also has its fatal drawbacks in that it ignores the importance of teaching and doctrine as a fundamental mark of the true church. Merely dying for one's faith does not necessarily mean that one's faith was historic Christianity.

Perhaps a better way of tracing our roots and establishing our historic credentials is not the trail of blood, but the trail of grace. Grace, after all, is the characteristic of God's dealings with his people throughout the ages. And the Lord has provided the church with many theologians across the generations who have safeguarded the fundamentals of God's grace. They have emphasized that grace is sovereign, transformative, an act of God's own mercy and pleasure, and powerful enough to deal with the moral and existential morass that is human life in this fallen world.

At the head of that trail in the postapostolic church stands Augustine. He teased out the implications of Scripture on the matter and set forth the issues in a way that laid down the lines of future debate. Protestants need have no shame in seeing their own cry of "grace alone!" resonating with that of the great fifth-century bishop of Hippo Regius. His thinking may have been obscured by some or misunderstood by others, but there is a faithful line of those who defended his view of grace through the Middle Ages, providing a foundation for the Reformation.

Before we move on to the Reformation, we'll stop to consider one of the great theologians of the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas, a theologian whose views on grace were as great and important as Augustine's.

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1. *A Treatise on the Gift of Perseverance*, in *Saint Augustin: Anti-Pelagian Writings*, ed. P. Schaff (New York: Christian Literature, 1887), 54; hereafter *APW*.

2. This is not to say that Augustine himself wished to excuse mediocrity or adopt a casual attitude to sin in the life of the Christian. But it is to say that this was certainly Pelagius's concern with Augustine's thought; and Augustine himself clearly develops a theology that places the accent decisively on the gracious action of God rather than on the moral effort of the believer.

3. Augustine quotes Pelagius to this effect in his work *On Nature and Grace* 18.20 (*APW*, 127).

4. Theodore DeBruyn, ed., *Pelagius's Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 65.

5. Ibid., 81.

6. Ibid., 92–95.

7. Also called "freedom of contrary choice," or, more critically, "freedom of indifference."

8. *On the Spirit and the Letter* 52 (*APW*, 106).

9. A brief but helpful outline of the background of Augustine's and Pelagius's different approaches to Romans can be found in DeBruyn, *Pelagius's Commentary*, 10–24.

10. *On the Spirit and the Letter* 19.33 (*APW*, 97).

11. *On the Spirit and the Letter* 17.29 (*APW*, 95).

12. Augustine offers a wonderful summary of this in *On the Spirit and the Letter* 19.32: "Let no Christian then stray from this faith, which alone is the Christian one; nor let any one, when he has been made to feel ashamed to say that we become righteous through our own selves, without the grace of God working this in us,—because he sees, when such an allegation is made, how unable pious believers are to endure it,—resort to any subterfuge on this point, by affirming that the reason why we cannot become righteous without the operation of God's grace is this, that He gave the law, He instituted its teaching, He commanded its precepts of good. For there is no doubt that, without His assisting grace, the law is 'the letter which killeth'; but when the life-giving spirit is present, the law causes that to be loved as written within, which it once caused to be feared as written without."

13. *Ad Simplicianum* 1.2.17; 1.2.8; 1.2.16.

14. *On Grace and Free Will* 29 (*APW*, 455–56).

15. *On Grace and Free Will* 30 (*APW*, 456).

16. *A Treatise on Rebuke and Grace* 13 (*APW*, 476–77).

17. *On the Predestination of the Saints* 7.12 (*APW*, 504); 8.14 (*APW*, 505); *On the Gift of Perseverance* 14.34 (*APW*, 538); 17.42 (*APW*, 542).

18. *On the Predestination of the Saints* 3.7 (*APW*, 500).

19. "I did not think that faith was preceded by God's grace, so that by its means would be given to us what we might profitably ask, except that we could not believe if the proclamation of the truth did not precede; but that we should consent when the gospel was preached to us I thought was our own doing, and came to us from ourselves" (*On Predestination* 3.7 [*APW*, 500]).

20. *Against Two Letters* 2.7.15 (*APW*, 398).

21. Augustine seems to have had a fascination with twins as helpful to theological argument. In the *Confessions* he uses them to refute the claims of astrology, as he here does to refute the claims of the Pelagians.

22. *Against Two Letters* 2.7.16 (*APW*, 399).

23. Later Pelagians would come to deny that physical death was a result of sin, thus circumventing

this particular objection but raising insurmountable problems relative to the Bible's teaching on the matter.

24. *Against Two Letters* 2.10.22 (*APW*, 401).

25. Peter T. Sanlon, *Augustine's Theology of Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 17–18.

26. *On the Gift of Perseverance* 19.48 (*APW*, 545).

27. It is worth giving some broad definitions of some standard terms that are used in distinguishing classic views of divine grace. "Pelagianism" refers to an understanding of grace in which there is only one mover of salvation, and it is the human. "Semi-Pelagianism" refers to an understanding of grace in which there are two movers, God and humans, and humans have the decisive role. Grace is neither prevenient nor irresistible. "Semi-Augustinianism" refers to an understanding of grace in which there are two movers, God and humans, and God moves first. Grace is prevenient but not irresistible. "Augustinianism" refers to an understanding of grace in which there is one mover, and that is God. Human beings are passive toward grace, which is both prevenient and irresistible.

28. Heinrich Denzinger et al., *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, 43rd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), paragraph 376 (p. 136).

29. For an introduction to this debate and the relevant texts from Gottschalk, see Victor Genke and Francis Gumerlock, eds., *Gottschalk and a Medieval Predestination Controversy* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2010).

30. On Eriugena, see Deirdre Carabine, *John Scottus Eriugena* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

31. Warfield, *Studies in Tertullian and Augustine*, 130.

32. Foxe's work, first published in 1563 and often revised and reprinted since, was the most influential martyrology of the sixteenth century and indeed one of the most important books in the formation of English Protestant culture until the end of the nineteenth century.

CHAPTER 4
Unexpected Ally: Thomas Aquinas

> You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others.
>
> *2 Timothy 2:1–2*

If the reception of Augustine's theology of grace was subject to some confusion in the West, there were still some theologians whose teaching maintained his clear emphasis on God's sovereignty and priority. Among these the most preeminent was Thomas Aquinas.[1]

Most Protestants, if they have heard of Thomas Aquinas, probably regard him with some degree of suspicion. He is, after all, the great theologian of Roman Catholicism who provided the most elaborate and compelling arguments for many Roman Catholic distinctives such as transubstantiation. For many Protestants he is regarded more as part of the problem than as someone we can study and learn from. Yet we should remember the very simple point that Aquinas, as a thirteenth-century figure, pre-dates the Reformation and thus is, in a sense, the property of the whole church's heritage. Aquinas's thought has been profoundly and positively influential on Protestant thinking, as recent studies have demonstrated, particularly on the doctrine of God.[2] More pertinent for this study is that he also articulated an understanding of grace undergirded by a doctrine of predestination, which helped to preserve a stream of anti-Pelagian thought in the Middle Ages. It is true that many of his ideas were repudiated by Protestants and form points of profound disagreement between the Reformers and their Roman Catholic opponents—the nature of justification, the role of penance, and the meaning of the sacraments being only the most obvious—but this should not blind us to the fact that the conceptual framework of predestination within which he understood the existential aspects of salvation was essentially continuous with that of Augustine and therefore within the same stream of thinking as that of the Reformers.

Aquinas's teaching on grace is rich and wide-ranging, and given his status as the preeminent theologian of medieval Catholicism, it is not surprising that much of his theology of grace was focused on the sacraments. Many Protestants will part company from him at this point, yet there is more to grace in Aquinas than baptism and the Mass. In fact, Aquinas can be immensely helpful to Protestants because his teaching on the framework of grace and some of the distinctions he draws concerning types of grace are still of use today. To begin, however, we need to know something of his

context.

Aquinas in Context

Aquinas was born in the thirteenth century, a key period for the intellectual development of Christianity. This era witnessed the founding of two great monastic orders, that of the Franciscans, or the Minor Brothers, and that of the Dominicans, or the Order of Preachers. Aquinas joined the latter. For most of his life he was committed to a life of preaching and pastoral work.

At the same time, universities were becoming more influential, offering hitherto unimaginable opportunities for intellectual excellence, the production of a comprehensive understanding of all of reality, and the synthesis of theology and other sciences. To add to the scholarly ferment, the metaphysical treatises of Aristotle were also being made available in Latin for the first time.

The history of the reception of Aristotle in the Latin-speaking West is crucial for understanding Aquinas and, indeed, for understanding the shape of late medieval thought. In the early sixth century, Christian layman Boethius had embarked on the ambitious project of translating all of Plato and Aristotle into Latin. Of those of Aristotle he had only managed to do the *Organon*, the collection of the philosopher's logical treatises, by the time of his execution for treason in 524. This left the rest of Aristotle's corpus still in Greek, and since this language was increasingly unknown in the West, the West remained cut off from works that might have fueled very different philosophical developments in its thought.

Aristotle's works were, however, translated into Arabic, which explains why Islamic culture was more advanced than that of the Christian West by the twelfth century. At that point, Aristotle's works started to make their way into Latin, often via Arabic translations, and the stage was set for major intellectual ferment.

This was the context for Aquinas's great contribution. More than any other theologian of this time, Aquinas engaged with Aristotle, reflecting on the intersection of his thought with Christian teaching. There were significant differences between the two schools of thought. For example, Aristotle seemed to think that matter was eternal, and this differed from Christian teaching on the creation of the world. All of this demanded reflection by Aquinas and others on the relationship between faith and reason. Yet Aristotle also provided Aquinas with a set of concepts that were useful in unpacking and arranging the Bible's teaching in many areas, not least the matter of grace. The stage was set for Aquinas to develop his understanding of grace against the background of Augustine's insights and with the help of Aristotle's understanding of the world.

Aquinas and Teleology

Basic to Aquinas's thinking is the Aristotelian notion of causality. Aristotle identified various types of causes: material, formal, efficient, and final. To understand the distinctions between these, it is helpful to start with an analogy. Take, for example, Michelangelo's famous statue of the Virgin Mary cradling the crucified Christ in her arms, the *Pieta*, which is found in St. Peter's in the Vatican City. Michelangelo was the sculptor. In Aristotelian terms, he was the *efficient* cause of the *Pieta*, because it was he who actually carved the statue. The material with which Michelangelo worked was marble. This was the material cause of the *Pieta*, for if that particular piece of marble did not exist,

there would be no statue. The shape of the *Pieta* is the formal cause, because if it were a different shape—say a general riding a horse to battle—it would not be the *Pieta*. And the final cause was the design in Michelangelo's head, for this guided every step of the process, from the choice of stone and selection of tools to the individual strokes of hammer and chisel on the marble.

In a sense, the most important of these is the final cause. The final cause is that which determines the final shape of the statue. We might say that, though last in the chronological order, the final cause has priority in the logical order.

Another helpful analogy to explain this specific point might be that of a journey. If I wish to go to New York, then the location of New York will determine everything I do before I arrive there: the transport I choose, the direction I move in, and so on. New York is chronologically the last place I arrive on my journey, but logically it is first because it shapes everything prior to that. This has significance for Aquinas's understanding of grace, for grace is that which takes human beings toward the goal for which they are designed. This goal is the beatific vision or, in more familiar terms, eternal life in God's presence in heaven.[3]

Aristotle's understanding of causality also relates to the appropriateness of each part of the process. Aristotle understood change as the movement of a thing from potency to act. Again, the terms may seem a little alien, but they are very helpful in understanding what Aquinas taught. Take the analogy of the block of marble and the *Pieta* again. The marble in its original state can be said to be in "potency" to the *Pieta*. In other words, it is suitable because of its size and substance to be made into a statue such as the *Pieta*. The skill of Michelangelo causes it to change from being merely a lump of rock to being a beautiful sculpture by the application of appropriate force.

It is important to note here that the material of the marble, the skill and the plan of the sculptor, and the method he uses to execute that plan are all appropriate to one another. There is a necessary relationship among them. Not even Michelangelo could carve the *Pieta* out of water. And an untrained person could not carve the *Pieta* out of marble. We might say that ends and means have to be consistent for the successful completion of the task.

An even better example might be the act of boiling water. For water to be turned into steam, it must be brought from a state of potency toward steam to a state of actually being steam. That is done by applying an appropriate cause—in this case heat of sufficient intensity—to achieve the desired effect. Water standing by itself in a bucket will not boil. It needs an appropriate force brought from outside to accomplish the move from potency to act.

What does this have to do with our understanding of grace? The answer is that Aristotelian causality offered Aquinas a vocabulary for explaining Christian salvation. Salvation, after all, is simply the bringing of human beings into eternal communion with the triune God. It involves a final cause (communion with God in eternity, which Aquinas describes as the *beatific vision*) and intermediate, subsidiary causes that bring this about. While Christians may disagree about the precise nature of our existence after death and then after the final judgment, all agree that there is a process by which we arrive there that is susceptible to the kind of causal analysis offered by Aquinas.

This has implications for our understanding of grace. Human beings are finite creatures. Eternal life is something of infinite value. This difference represents something of a violation of Aristotle's causality, a final cause that far outstrips anything human creatures could naturally achieve for themselves. And it is in the context of this dilemma that Aquinas's understanding of grace is best

understood.

There is often one immediate objection to this idea, however. Some might say at this point, "But that is a problem generated by Aristotelian thought, not by the Bible, so why should we take Aquinas's contribution here with any degree of seriousness?" In response, I would argue that Aristotle merely provides Aquinas with the conceptual vocabulary for expressing what is, in fact, a problem that lies at the heart of the Bible's teaching on salvation. It is very clear that human beings, in their fallen state, are incapable of meriting eternal life by themselves. This is the point of Paul's teaching on the Adam-Christ parallel in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15. Death is not something that can be avoided or overcome by the individual considered in isolation. It requires the action of God, the sovereign, powerful action of God, in order to bring about resurrection and eternal fellowship with the Lord. The language is simply a tool to help us unpack the underlying implications of the Bible's teaching, as we see below.

Human Beings and Their Supernatural End

Aquinas believed that, like all creatures, human beings have natural ends appropriate to their natures, or substance. We eat and drink. We walk and talk. We make love and reproduce. All of these things belong to what it means to be human. Yet human beings are more than just one type of creature among many. As well as these natural ends, there is something more. Being made in the image of God and destined to spend eternity in communion with him, they also have a supernatural end that transcends their nature. This is a critical foundation for Aquinas's understanding of grace, as is clear from the very start of the *Summa Theologiae*, the basic textbook of theology he was writing when he died in 1274.

His work begins with the question "Whether, besides philosophy, any further doctrine is required?"[4] Here is his response:

> *I answer that*, it was necessary for man's salvation that there should be a knowledge revealed by God besides philosophical science built up by human reason. Firstly, indeed, because man is directed to God, as to an end that surpasses the grasp of his reason: *The eye hath not seen, O God, besides Thee, what things Thou hast prepared for them that wait for Thee* (Isa. 66:4). But the end must first be known by men who are to direct their thoughts and actions to the end. Hence it was necessary for the salvation of man that certain truths which exceed human reason should be made known to him by divine revelation. Even as regards those truths about God which human reason could have discovered, it was necessary that man should be taught by a divine revelation; because the truth about God such as reason could discover, would only be known by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors. Whereas man's whole salvation, which is in God, depends upon the knowledge of this truth. Therefore, in order that the salvation of men might be brought about more fitly and more surely, it was necessary that they should be taught divine truths by divine revelation. It was therefore necessary that, besides philosophical science built up by reason there should be a sacred science learned through revelation.[5]

Given what we noted earlier, several aspects of this statement are important. First, Aquinas identifies God (i.e., communion with God) as the end cause of human existence. That is what we are designed for. Yet he also identifies this end cause as beyond the grasp of human reason. Because God is infinite and we are finite, we cannot simply grasp our final end. Notice that this is an ontological point, something tied up with our very being as finite creatures, and not something exclusively to do with our fallen human nature. Aquinas is not speaking here of God as being beyond the grasp of sinful human reason. Human beings as *finite* creatures cannot grasp infinite God as their end. For this reason, God must reveal certain truths about himself. He must take the initiative in order to enable human beings to focus on him as their end. God must condescend to the level of human beings in order to make himself, and their end, known to them.[6] In fact, Aquinas goes even further, arguing not only for the need of such a revelation but also for grace *before* the fall.

Grace in Creation

Grace in creation is a topic that Aquinas addresses at several points and at some length. It helps us to see his thought in this area to appreciate the overall shape of Aquinas's understanding of the role of grace in salvation. Aquinas believed that Adam in the garden existed in a state of greater blessing than we do after the fall, yet he still did not enjoy the full communion with God that Aquinas saw yet to come in the beatific vision. The beatific vision of God is the knowledge of the essence of God, and it is only available to creatures on the basis of a prior act of God's grace. It is not possible in their natural, created state. Natural creatures cannot achieve a supernatural end through their own strength. They are simply not designed to do that. To quote Aquinas, "The created [human] intellect cannot see the essence of God, unless God by his grace unites himself to the created intellect, as an object intelligible to it."[7] Adam did not enjoy this vision in the garden, as evidenced by his fall: one who possesses the beatific vision can never turn away from it.[8] Nevertheless, he did enjoy a greater degree of blessedness than fallen human beings because his mind was properly ordered by grace to understand God through his created effects. This brings us to the question of grace before the fall: How did grace operate prior to humanity's fall into sin?

In his discussion of the creation of Adam and Eve, Aquinas asks whether grace was present in the created state prior to the fall. He answers in the affirmative. His evidence is the right ordering of Adam's faculties. Human beings are made of body and soul, which possess certain faculties and stand in a particular relationship to each other. In the pre-fall state of creation, Adam's reason was subject to God; his lower powers were subject to reason, and the body was subject to the soul. After the fall, these basic elements remain in existence. He is still body and soul, with all of their constituent aspects. What has changed is the hierarchical ordering of these, which is now thrown into chaos. For example, where Adam should have been led by his intellect to follow the word of God, now his bodily appetites might seize control. A fundamental irrationality is now part of all human existence. Grace, for Aquinas, was needed before the fall to keep all these faculties in proper order. When it was forfeited at the fall, chaos ensued.

Before the fall, Adam needed grace in order to do and to desire supernatural good. We noted earlier how supernatural ends require supernatural means, and this principle applies even in the state of pristine human nature. The desire for the beatific vision and the actions required to move toward it are beyond the capacity of created human nature, just as reaching boiling point is beyond the natural

capacity of a bucket of cold water standing by itself. An appropriate external cause is needed to achieve the desired result. A great cause is needed to move human beings toward beatitude, a cause that comes from God himself: grace.[9]

Of course, grace is needed even more after the fall, which Aquinas characterizes as the loss of God's grace. Here he cites a passage from Augustine's *City of God* 13.13: "As soon as they disobeyed the divine command, and forfeited Divine grace, they were ashamed of their nakedness, for they felt the impulse of disobedience in the flesh, as though it were a punishment corresponding to their own disobedience." Grace is that which properly orders the created hierarchy of human psychology. Sin leads to its loss and to subsequent chaos.

At this point Aquinas asks a related question as to whether the actions of the first man were less meritorious than ours. He answers by making a distinction between merit as regards the roots of a work and merit as regards the degree of action itself. Pre-fall works were more meritorious in the first sense, in that they were done with a greater degree of grace because the agent was not fighting against any hindrance in his own nature. Those after the fall are more meritorious in the second sense because they require more effort (and Aquinas here cites the incident of the widow's mite as his biblical justification).[10]

What are we to make of Aquinas and his understanding of grace? And how does it relate to the later Reformation understandings of grace? First, it is worth noting again that Aquinas is using Aristotelian concepts to express a standard biblical and theological problem: How would Adam have moved from a state of mutability to immutability, given that his obedience could never have strictly merited such on its own? We should be cautious in assuming a corrupting influence from Aristotle at this point. Aquinas would no doubt respond to such a criticism by arguing that he is simply using the philosophical idiom of the day to delineate a perennial Christian issue.

We should also note his identification of grace with the internal activity of God in the life of the individual. Aquinas is picking up on an aspect of the Augustinian legacy and on the variety of ways grace is referenced in Scripture. Adam before the fall is a rightly ordered human being because God's presence in him (presumably by the Holy Spirit) keeps his faculties in the proper order. *Grace is something real and active in his life, not simply the gracious disposition of God toward him.*[11] Sin destroys this activity in Adam's life and creates a psychologically disordered individual. Adam's nature is not left intact after the loss of grace, because grace is not something extra that can be removed, leaving human nature with a natural integrity. The faculties remain (reason, will, etc.), but their relationship is now perverted in such a way that every human being's existence is profoundly transformed in a negative way.

Here we have the basic foundations laid for Aquinas's view of salvation from sin. Salvation is transformative, dependent upon the subjective work of God in the human person. Grace, according to Aquinas, operates at the subjective, transformative level, enabling men and women to reach the supernatural end for which they were intended. He denies that it is a substance because that would displace the soul.[12] Instead he asserts that it is a quality imparted to the soul by God in order to heal and elevate it.

Aquinas's argument for grace *before* the fall offers us an opportunity for critical reflection on the notion of grace in general. Aquinas clearly has no hesitation is using the language of grace in a nonredemptive context. Adam possesses grace in the garden because his finitude makes it necessary if

he is to achieve his supernatural end. The question for us today is this: Is such a use of the language of grace appropriate? Is it biblical?

Aquinas is wrestling with a problem which all theologians must face at some level: How do finite human beings come to receive such an incredible reward as eternal life from God, when they cannot —even in their unfallen state—be properly said to deserve such? Still, the use of the language of grace prior to the fall is ultimately problematic.

First, there is the biblical argument. As we noted in the first chapter, grace in Scripture refers specifically to God's good will in the face of humanity's fall. Of course, theologians routinely use nonbiblical language to speak of biblical realities—"Trinity" being an obvious example—so we must be careful that we don't have a knee-jerk reaction to using certain terms in broader ways than Scripture. Yet there is also the danger that such usage can become rather ambiguous, leading to linguistic connotations that may be highly inappropriate or confusing. That the language of grace is not used to speak of the condition of humanity before the fall is surely of significance, and we should think long and hard before deviating from the biblical precedent.

The second reason is more strictly theological. It is true that many early Reformed Protestant theologians used the language of grace to refer to God's activity prior to the fall.[13] They did this to emphasize the condescension of God in establishing the covenant of works with Adam. Adam as creature had no hold over God, nothing whereby he might be said to deserve anything at his hand. Yet God made him the federal head of humanity (Rom 5; 1 Cor 15). This act on God's part was free and uncoerced and involved divine condescension. In addition, God attached to this covenant a reward—eternal life—which no mere mortal could have merited in and of himself. That is why earlier Protestant theologians felt able to refer to it in terms of grace. God's action and his covenant reward were gifts—unmerited and undeserved in themselves.

Yet this is not the most helpful usage of the term. Why? Because we are using the same term in both nonredemptive and redemptive contexts, and in doing so we run the risk of blurring the distinction between humanity's pre- and postfall condition. Sin is not a part of created nature. It represents a fundamental and decisive breach in the relationship between God and humanity. *This is why the problem of a finite but morally unfallen Adam is dramatically different from the problem of fallen Adam.* The former may have an intrinsic problem meriting eternal life, but the latter positively deserves eternal damnation. When we use "grace" to refer to what is a simple problem of being (that human beings are finite and God is infinite) and also to the problem caused by sin (that God is holy and human beings are unholy) it is potentially misleading.

So what are we to make of Aquinas and his understanding of grace? Aquinas's understanding of grace in creation is useful to the extent that it highlights the self-sufficiency of God, that he did not need to create this world but did so as a free act. It also highlights the need for divine condescension even in the garden in order for Adam and Eve to enjoy the kind of relationship they had with God there. These are helpful concepts for us to consider, but to characterize this with the language of grace is confusing because it deviates from the linguistic usage of the Bible and runs the risk of relativizing the dramatic and decisive nature of the fall with regard to human relations with God and the consequent need for salvation.

Grace and Predestination

Thoughtful Protestants are often aware of the role of Augustine in formulating the doctrine of predestination, but many do not realize that there were many theologians in the Middle Ages who taught the doctrine faithfully. Luther's polemic against the alleged Pelagianism of his medieval teachers has captured our imagination, yet Luther's teachers represented only a narrow strand of the medieval church's teaching. Others, such as Thomas Aquinas, the greatest medieval theologian of them all, were far closer to Augustine on this point than the men who taught Luther.

Aquinas's emphasis on teleology, the proper end of creatures according to their nature, undergirds his understanding of providence and dovetails with his view of predestination. In *Summa Theologiae* 1a.22.1 he asks whether providence can be ascribed to God and responds in the affirmative, on the grounds that God creates all things as good both in respect to their intrinsic substance and in respect to the end to which they are ordered. This applies not simply to general categories of things (e.g., sharks are ordered toward eating smaller fish) but even to individuals within such general classes (e.g., this particular shark is ordered toward eating this particular smaller fish). This is for the simple reason that all things depend on God for their being, and thus all things are related to him as their first cause.[14]

And Aquinas is also quite clear in his treatment of predestination. In the following question in the *Summa Theologiae*, he asks whether men are predestined by God and offers this answer:

> It is fitting that God should predestine men. For all things are subject to His providence, as was shown above…. Now it belongs to providence to direct things towards their end, as was also said…. The end towards which created things are directed by God is twofold; one which exceeds all proportion and faculty of created nature; and this end is life eternal, that consists in seeing God which is above the nature of every creature, as shown above…. The other end, however, is proportionate to created nature, to which end created being can attain according to the power of its nature. Now if a thing cannot attain to something by the power of its nature, it must be directed thereto by another; thus, an arrow is directed by the archer towards a mark. Hence, properly speaking, a rational creature, capable of eternal life, is led towards it, directed, as it were, by God. The reason of that direction pre-exists in God; as in Him is the type of the order of all things towards an end, which we proved above to be providence. Now the type in the mind of the doer of something to be done, is a kind of pre-existence in him of the thing to be done. Hence the type of the aforesaid direction of a rational creature towards the end of life eternal is called predestination. For to destine, is to direct or send. Thus it is clear that predestination, as regards its objects, is a part of providence.[15]

The argument is straightforward and makes the point that God directs all things toward their proper end (providence). Some ends are proportional to the creature's nature (e.g., procreation). Other ends, however, may be beyond the nature of the creature. This is the case with eternal life. Human beings cannot achieve this simply by acting in accordance with their nature. Like how water turning into steam requires some cause from outside to move it from potency to act, so human beings require some cause beyond that intrinsic to their nature which can move them to eternal life. This is predestination: literally, the prior determination of God to take particular individuals beyond their

natural capacities and into eternal communion with himself.

Of course, the flip side of this view is that God decides not to bring some human beings into the final state of grace and thus leaves them in their sin and to the punishment that it merits. This Aquinas calls reprobation.[16] He goes on to make it clear that foreknowledge of merits is not the basis of predestination,[17] that predestination is certain,[18] and that the number of predestined is fixed.[19] In short, Aquinas offers an account of predestination in the *Summa Theologiae* that represents positions quite consistent with those we earlier noted in Augustine and his anti-Pelagian heirs.

Of course, while many think of Aquinas as primarily a philosophical theologian or a systematician, we should recognize at least two important things about him. First, he was a member of the Dominican Order—the Order of Preachers—and thus committed to the public exposition of Scripture. His is not an arid, abstract theology; it is a theology that is always designed to terminate in the life of the church.

In addition, as a medieval theological teacher, he was required to expound Scripture as part of his basic training, to be qualified for the task of lecturing. While we may know him best for his *Summa Theologiae* and *Summa contra Gentiles*, he also produced a significant number of lectures (commentaries) on biblical books. One of these is on Romans. His comments on Romans 9:11–13 articulate an understanding of predestination that is both consistent with Augustine and nuanced.

First, God's love is prior and eternal. On Romans 9:12 he comments:

> But because man's love is preceded by God's love: *not that we loved God, but that he has first loved us* (1 John 4:20), we must say that Jacob was loved by God before he loved God. Nor can it be said that God began to love him at a fixed point in time, otherwise his love would be changeable.[20]

Aquinas goes on to identify three elements that underlie the verse: love, election, and predestination. Because God is simple for Aquinas, these are distinctions that human beings make in order to be able to speak about God. Love is foundational and prior to all. God's love is not like human love, in that human love is reactive in that it sees good in an object and is drawn toward it. In Aquinas's terminology, for human beings, election precedes love. They choose something good, and then they love it. For God, the order is reversed. He loves something absolutely in himself, chooses it, and then guides it toward its end. As Aquinas puts it:

> For it is called God's love, inasmuch as he wills good to a person absolutely; it is election, inasmuch as through the good he wills for a person, he prefers him to someone else. But it is called predestination, inasmuch as he directs a person to the good he wills for him by loving and choosing him.[21]

The distinctions are carefully drawn, of course, but there is nothing here to which Augustine, or Calvin for that matter, might object.

Indeed, Aquinas goes one step further and addresses the issue of the relationship between predestination and rejection. Like predestination to glory, rejection is eternal because everything God wills is willed eternally. Yet he maintains a difference between predestination and rejection. Because

human beings are sinful, good works can only flow as a result of God's first predestining someone to good works. If, in the logical ordering of divine decisions, predestination does not come first, then there can be no good works. One might say that God could not even hypothetically conceive of a world where a sinner who has not first been predestined could do any works meriting salvation.

But the same reasoning does not apply to rejection:

> [A] foreknowledge of merits cannot be the reason for predestination, because the foreknown merits fall under predestination; but the foreknowledge of sins can be a reason for rejection on the part of the punishment prepared for the rejected, inasmuch as God proposes to punish the wicked for the sins they have from themselves, not from God; the just he proposes to reward on account of the merits they do not have from themselves.[22]

To put it simply, this means that Aquinas is a single predestinarian, seeing the lost as those who have been passed over by God and not positively made into objects of his electing, predestinating will. This places him well within the bounds of classic Augustinian anti-Pelagianism and undergirds a view of grace that places God's sovereignty at the center.

Further Distinctions in Grace

Grace as predestination is, of course, only one part of what Aquinas has to say on grace, though it is in many ways the part that is most useful to Protestants, given the highly sacramental direction of his thought. Nevertheless, it is still helpful to note a few additional distinctions that he makes. Later in the *Summa,* Aquinas argues that grace can have three legitimate meanings. Grace can mean love or favor. The example he uses is of a soldier being in the king's good graces, which means that the king looks on him with favor. It can also mean any gift that is given freely. And finally, it can mean the response to a free gift, as in the term "gratitude."[23]

The first of these definitions we have noted before. It encompasses election and predestination as they connect to God's love toward the elect. We know already that this arises solely out of God's own being and is not the response of God to any merits or righteousness in the individual. On this point, Aquinas stands in line with both Augustine and with later Roman Catholics and Protestants such as Cornelius Jansen, Martin Luther, and John Calvin.[24]

But there are further nuances to grace that Aquinas wishes to draw out, and so, in good scholastic fashion, he goes on to distinguish grace in six ways. It can be understood as (1) sanctifying grace, whereby God unites people to himself. Then there is (2) gratuitous, or free grace, whereby someone is empowered by God to help another person to become holy. For this grace, he cites 1 Corinthians 12:7, which refers to the manifestations of the Spirit among believers in the congregation.[25] Next comes the distinction between (3) operative and (4) cooperative grace. Operative grace refers to the grace by which God moves individuals to start willing that which God himself wills. Cooperative grace refers to the grace by which God continues to move individuals to will that which he wills.[26] Finally, he distinguishes between (5) prevenient grace, which comes before any acts that are done in a state of grace, and (6) subsequent grace, which comes after God has brought individuals into a state of grace.[27]

What Aquinas does in developing this elaborate taxonomy of grace is offer a means whereby the whole of Christian existence can be understood as dependent on the favor of God. All of this undergirds the point made earlier in the introduction: to claim that salvation is by grace alone is not a particularly significant statement in itself. It simply indicates that one is building one's understanding of salvation on a common Pauline vocabulary. Indeed, Aquinas constructs his entire understanding of human existence on the notion of grace.

Perhaps the most important of these distinctions for our purpose here is the one Aquinas makes between operative and cooperative grace. When we think about grace, we should do two things to maintain a biblical posture: underline God's sovereignty and priority, and make place for human responsibility. Aquinas's distinction between operative and cooperative grace allows him to do this. God's operative grace is that by which he sovereignly works in someone to accomplish his gracious will for them. In an evangelical context, we might point to regeneration as an act of operative grace, whereby the individual is passive (i.e., justification). It is the execution in time of the divine decree of predestination. Cooperative grace is that which works with the individual who is seeking to, in the Bible's words, work out her salvation in fear and trembling (i.e., sanctification).

It is, of course, vital in the maintenance of an Augustinian understanding of salvation to maintain the priority of operative grace over cooperative grace; but if that is done, the distinction Aquinas makes still allows room for an emphasis on the imperatives of the Christian life. This allows us to respond to Pelagius's concerns about Augustine's prayer "Command what you will and give what you command." There is room for the believer to strive after holiness with the assistance of the Holy Spirit in the context of God's sovereign and prior grace.

Concluding Thoughts

We've taken a whirlwind tour of a major figure in the history of theology, but we cannot formulate a proper theology of grace without considering the work of Aquinas. And I hope that you have found that when it comes to grace, Protestants have an unexpected ally in Aquinas. He was a valiant exponent of the priority of God's grace and of the fundamentals of Augustine's understanding of predestination, albeit expressed in a different philosophical idiom. He is an ally on one of the most important points in Christian theology: the sovereign priority of God in salvation. Interestingly enough, his discussions of predestination and how it connects to the doctrine of God recur in Protestant theology in the seventeenth century: the Reformed orthodox knew a clever and useful source when they saw one.

This is not to minimize the significant differences that exist and continue to exist between Protestants and Roman Catholics, but it is to point evangelicals back to the broader catholic tradition from which their own theology draws. It is good to know—indeed humbling to be reminded—that grace is not an invention of the Reformation. Our Reformation heroes drew deep from wells dug by those who went before them. As Protestants we need to understand that our faith did not emerge from a vacuum in 1517 when Luther approached the castle door in Wittenberg with his Ninety-Five Theses. The Reformation represented, as Warfield said, the triumph of Augustine's understanding of grace over his understanding of the church. And that understanding of the predestinarian, anti-Pelagian nature of grace was kept alive in the Middle Ages and mediated to the Reformers through the writings of the great theologians of that period, of whom there was none greater and more influential than

Aquinas. Yet, as we noted above, there are flaws and ambiguities in Aquinas's thought which make his relationship to later Protestantism highly ambiguous at points. Ultimately, we will see that the Protestants were more faithful to Augustine—and to Paul—than their medieval predecessors, even as they were dependent on them for important aspects of their thinking.

And it is to these heroes that we now turn.

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1. For an introduction to Aquinas's life, the little book by G. K. Chesterton, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Dumb Ox*, available in numerous editions, is probably the best place to start. For a more thorough survey of both his life and thought, see Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993). For those wanting to go deeper, the best thing to do is to read Aquinas himself. The *Summa Theologiae* is available online and in print in a good, literal translation by the Dominicans of the nineteenth century. The *Summae* can be daunting, so it is a good idea to read them alongside the excellent commentaries by Brian Davies: *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae: A Guide and Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); and *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Contra Gentiles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). A good selection of his writings can be found in Ralph McInerny, ed., *Thomas Aquinas: Selected Writings* (London: Penguin, 1999), which includes both a helpful introduction and devotional material as well as selections from the more familiar philosophical and theological works.

2. E.g., Carl R. Trueman, *The Claims of Truth: John Owen's Trinitarian Theology* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1998); James Dolezal, *God without Part: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God's Absoluteness* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011).

3. Christians disagree over how to characterize the afterlife. Is it to be spoken of as life in heaven or as on the new earth? Given the mysterious nature of the topic, this would seem to me to be an area where Christians can legitimately agree to differ. In any case, such differences in contemporary Christian theology are not of great significance to the point being made here about Aquinas, grace, and causality.

4. We should not impose modern understandings of the scope and nature of philosophy on Aquinas's term here. We might better understand it as "knowledge available to natural reason."

5. *ST* 1a.1 (translation used here and hereafter is Thomas Aquinas, *The "Summa Theologica" of St. Thomas Aquinas, Literally Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province*, 2nd ed., 22 vols. [London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne, 1920–42].

6. It is also worth noting that Aquinas offers here an extremely modest view of human reason even in relation to those truths about God which are susceptible to human reason (such, one assumes, as his existence and his simplicity). These truths are only available to the most brilliant of human beings, and then only after extensive study. Further, such have great potential for being mixed with error, and there is no way that one would be able to discern the error without some form of external criterion or authority. Hence the need for revelation.

7. *ST* 1a.12.4 (Burns, Oates, and Washbourne).

8. *ST* 1a.94.1.

9. *ST* 1a.2ae.109.2.

10. *ST* 1a.95.4.

11. We noted in chapter 1 that sometimes Paul speaks of grace as something active and at work in the life of the believer. That aspect of the idea was picked up and developed in the Middle Ages by Aquinas, among others, and provided a core piece of the sacerdotal system which tended to tie grace to the sacraments. In order to safeguard the biblical teaching, it would seem that care must be taken here to ensure that when the term "grace" is used in the sense of the subjective activity of God in the life of a believer, it is identified with the work of the Holy Spirit.

12. *ST* 1a2ae.110.2.2.

13. Speaking of the reward for obedience, Francis Turretin says: "With respect to God, [the reward] was gratuitous, as depending upon a pact or gratuitous promise (by which God was bound not to man but to himself and his own goodness, fidelity and truth, Rom. 3:3, 2 Tim. 2:13). Therefore there was no debt (properly so called) from which man could derive a right, but only a debt of fidelity, arising out of the promise by which God demonstrated his infallible constancy and truth" (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vols. [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992], 8.3.15 [vol. 1, p. 578]).

14. *ST* 1a.22.2.

15. *ST* 1a.23.1 (Burns, Oates, and Washburn).

16. *ST* 1a.23.3.

17. *ST* 1a.23.5.

18. *ST* 1a.23.6.

19. *ST* 1a.23.7.

20. *Commentary on the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans*, ed. J. Mortensen and E. Alarcón, trans. F. R. Larcher (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), 254.

21. Ibid., 255.

22. Ibid.

23. *ST* 1a2ae.110.1 (Burns, Oates, and Washbourne).

24. Cornelius Jansen (1585–1638) was bishop of Ypres from 1635–38 and the author of a posthumously published study of the theology of Augustine, *Augustinus*. This work sought to repristinate the anti-Pelagianism of Augustine's theology and triggered a long-running debate within French Roman Catholicism between the Jesuits, who held to a form of semi-Pelagianism not unlike Protestant Arminianism, and those dubbed Jansenists, among whom the most famous was mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623–62). The debate has many parallels to that between the Arminians and the Calvinists in Protestantism, in part because the Arminians drew self-consciously on Jesuit theology in their own doctrinal formulations regarding God's knowledge. The accent on Augustinian grace rendered the Jansenists susceptible to accusations of being crypto-Calvinists and to their official suppression by the Roman Church in the latter half of the seventeenth century.

25. *ST* 1a2ae.111.1.

26. *ST* 1a2ae.111.2.

27. *ST* 1a.2ae.111.3.

CHAPTER 5
Justification by Grace: Martin Luther

> For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.
>
> *Ephesians 2:8–9*

To this point, we've looked at the understanding of grace prior to the Reformation. Why? Because I want to demonstrate that the biblical understanding of grace is something that was faithfully preserved and transmitted by many theologians throughout the ages. Protestants sometimes wonder where the church was before Martin Luther appeared in the sixteenth century, and one answer is that his understanding of grace was not radically new. It was not something he invented but something that finds antecedents throughout the ages. Even the Reformation notion of salvation *by grace alone* was not really an innovation, even though the Reformers developed and deployed it in new and significant ways.

It is no secret that classic, Augustinian grace was central to the Reformation, and this was made clear in 1525. In that year Martin Luther responded to humanist Desiderius Erasmus's *Diatribe on Free Will* (1524).[1] Erasmus had been under huge pressure from at least 1520 to make clear where he stood in relation to the theology emerging from the University of Wittenberg. This work was Erasmus's attempt to distinguish himself from the Reformer and to reassure his Catholic critics of his ecclesiastical loyalty.

Erasmus's work is little read by anyone but scholars today, yet Luther's response has become a Christian classic. *On the Bondage of the Will* was perhaps his single greatest work and certainly one of only three of his books that he considered worthy of surviving his own lifetime. It is his masterful articulation of the notion that the human will is bound and that our intuitive sense of complete freedom with regard to decision making is an illusion when it comes to the matter of salvation. Yet in the conclusion of the work, Luther makes an unexpected and intriguing comment:

> I praise and commend you highly for this also, that unlike all the rest you alone have attacked the real issue, the essence of the matter in dispute, and have not wearied me with irrelevancies about the papacy, purgatory, indulgences, and such like trifles (for trifles they are rather than basic issues), with which almost everyone hitherto has gone hunting for me without success. You and you alone have seen the question on which everything

hinges, and have aimed at the vital spot; for which I sincerely thank you, since I am only too glad to give as much attention to this subject as time and leisure permit.[2]

To anyone familiar with the career of the Reformer, this is a startling statement. After all, indulgences and purgatory had first brought Luther to public prominence, and his attacks on the authority of the papacy had earned him excommunication. Yet Luther refers to these as trifles compared to the points underlying his debate with Erasmus. Further, it is the doctrine of justification by faith alone that most people associate with his name.[3] So why did Luther believe that the issues raised by Erasmus were the central matters in the debate over the Reformation?

The argument of *Bondage of the Will* has two major—and related—focal points. One is the obvious issue of the impotence of the human will in matters of salvation. The other is the clarity of Scripture. The two are connected because Erasmus's argument is that Scripture is obscure on the issue of the will (and on many other doctrines), and so we should not make this doctrine—or many others—an integral part of the faith. Luther's response is to emphasize the vital doctrinal nature of faith and to assert Scripture's clarity. He further argues that Christian certainty about salvation depends on salvation being all of God. Our will contributed nothing, which assumes that it is bound.[4]

Underlying it all, of course, was Luther's conviction that his Reformation was fundamentally about the nature of grace. Indeed, he himself saw the struggle in his own day as a recapitulation of the battles between Augustine and Pelagius in the fifth century. While we might think of it first and foremost as a debate about justification or authority, Luther regarded both of those matters as consequences of prior convictions about grace.

The Late Medieval Background

Of all the major Reformers, Luther was the most medieval. He had a medieval calling as a monk. He was not trained as a Renaissance humanist but deeply schooled in medieval theology. Thus, to understand Luther on grace one must first understand the medieval background which formed him and against which he ultimately rebelled, albeit somewhat selectively.

In the last chapter we studied the view of grace offered by Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas and the Thomist tradition did not, however, provide the context for Luther's thought. Indeed, he was trained in a school of theology which actually represented something of a critique of the Thomistic approach and which subsequent Roman Catholic writers have therefore held responsible for the Reformation.[5]

Several theological shifts took place in Western theology after Aquinas that had profound significance for the development of Reformation theology. The first was the rise of voluntarism as articulated by theologians such as the Franciscan Duns Scotus (ca. 1266–1308). This was the idea that God's will, not God's intellect, was the decisive factor in God's actions. I recognize that this needs some unpacking. First, we need to understand that orthodox medieval theologians were convinced that God was simple (not composed of parts) and that distinctions made by human beings when they talked about God were not distinctions of parts. God was not justice in one part, mercy in another, for example. In fact, the human language of distinction in God functioned in a manner analogous to the multiple power of the number one: 1, 1^2, 1^3, 1^4, and so on. All have the same reference, the number one, but all are saying different things. The distinction between God's intellect

and God's will is one created by theologians to enable them to speak and think meaningfully about God, similar to the difference between 1 and 1^2 to a mathematician. When we talk about God's will and God's intellect, we are in one sense talking about the same thing because God is simple, and that means that there is no one part of him that is will and another part of him that is intellect. Yet we are still saying something different when we use the two terms. We might say that we are talking about God as if he were complex, in a sense, in order to be able to grasp something of his nature.

When the voluntarists prioritized God's will over his intellect, they were making an epistemological point. God does what he chooses to do. We cannot predict in advance, based on the way the world is, or appears to be, how God will act. This is significant because it effectively breaks the causal chain that lay at the heart of Aquinas's understanding of grace and salvation. We cannot predict in advance what God must or must not do in order to bring about a particular result. Where Aquinas thought that the sacraments were necessary because they were the means by which God infused grace and transformed the individual, for the voluntarists that was no longer the case.

Along with the rise in voluntarism came a second influential stream of thinking, that of nominalism, which represented a way of thinking about words. A key figure in this development was another Franciscan, William of Occam (ca. 1287–1347). The problem of predication, of how words can be applied to things, is as old as philosophy itself and tends to be resolved in one of two ways. First, there is realism. Realism makes the case that a word such as "dog" can be applied to an individual being because that individual participates in some greater, universal reality which we might characterize as "dogginess." Thus, it is inappropriate to call a cat a "dog" because the cat does not stand in this relationship to universal dogginess. Dogginess is real, and to the extent that some individual thing participates in, or resembles, that dogginess, to that extent it can be called a dog.

Nominalists, however, take a very different approach. They regard individuals as constituting reality, and thus words that refer to general concepts or to universals—dogginess, humanity, and so on—are really linguistic constructs that we have made. Thus, an individual is called a dog because in doing so we are ascribing it to the set of things we wish to refer to as dogs. We are not implying that there is a real category of dog that has any kind of existence beyond, or independent of, the various individuals we assign to the class of dog.

The affinity between voluntarism and nominalism is that both undermine the significance of what we might call empirical reality in shaping the understanding of what is actually real. For voluntarists, reality becomes intrinsically unpredictable because God's will is the only thing that really matters. Teleology of the Thomist variety is rendered irrelevant. Ends are not a function of the intrinsic nature of a thing; they are merely a function of what God decides to do with each thing. And for nominalists, reality becomes a linguistic construct. Something may look like a dog; but if God declares it to be a cat, then a cat is what it is. God's speech, not our observations of empirical reality, is the decisive factor.

Voluntarism and nominalism were mediated to Luther in large part through the writings of Gabriel Biel (ca. 1420–95), whose *Canon of the Mass* formed part of Luther's basic education. Biel, wrestling with the question of how an individual could attain a state of grace, formulated the idea of a *pactum*, or a pact, between God and human beings. The basic idea was that God had committed himself to bestowing a state of grace on those who, literally, did what was in them (i.e., did their best).[6] This initial "doing what they could" was called congruent merit because it was only accepted

on the basis of the *pactum*. Once the individual was in a state of grace, they could then produce condign merit—intrinsically good works that were performed by grace. This approach is often characterized in the scholarly literature as representative of the *via moderna* (lit. "the modern way"), as opposed to the *via antiqua* (lit. "ancient way").[7]

What should we make of Biel's thinking here? First, Biel clearly assumes a certain freedom of action in the human will. It would be unfair to characterize his position as Pelagian because the *pactum* does make it clear that no individual is meriting salvation in a strict sense. Unless God had first established the *pactum* as a mechanism for allowing human beings to merit grace, there would be no merit. God has gracious priority in the scheme. Nonetheless, the works done in the context of the graciously established *pactum* are freely performed by the individual. The choice to act or not to act lies within the power of the person concerned.

Second, the criteria for attaining a state of grace are subjective and thus offer no real basis for assurance. This was not a particular problem in the medieval church because assurance of salvation was not the expected norm for Christians anyway. But it became an acute problem with Martin Luther, for whom the existential question of his status before God was all-consuming.

Third, a clean break is made in the matter of justification between the intrinsic qualities of the Christian and the question of his status before God. This is a clear point of affinity with the Reformation theology of Martin Luther. For Luther, the justified person is the one who is *declared* to be righteous by God on the basic of the extrinsic and imputed righteousness of Christ. Thus, with Luther, as with the system of Biel, there is no necessary connection between intrinsic quality and external denomination. For all of Luther's repudiation of what he was taught in the medieval classroom, it was Gabriel Biel's theology that set the stage for the Reformation on a number of key points.

Luther's Development to 1518

Luther's Reformation theology was the result of three things: an intense personality, a pressing existential quest, and a theology that was incapable of answering the questions raised by the first two.

His early years in the cloister were haunted both by the fear that his monastic vocation was a huge disappointment to his father (it was) and by a growing anxiety concerning his inability to stand before a holy and righteous God. In this context, the theology of Biel proved experientially inadequate because of the pressing doubt that it cultivated with regard to whether one had ever really done one's best and thus achieved a state of grace. The question of personal assurance was a pressing one for the young Luther, and to be told, in effect, simply to do his best was no answer. This was a subjective criterion that itself generated further doubts in Luther's mind about what his best might be and how he might know that he had achieved it.

It was not simply existentially inadequate. It was also theologically inadequate. As a young university professor, Luther was required to lecture on books of the Bible. In 1515–16 he lectured through Paul's letter to the Romans. These lectures were lost for many years, but a copy was rediscovered in the late nineteenth century in the Vatican Library. This, together with various sets of student notes and another copy in the University of Berlin, formed the basis for the critical edition of the text. What this volume does, of course, is offer significant insights into Luther's thinking on Paul during the key years of his development immediately prior to the indulgence controversy.[8]

Several themes emerge in these lectures that indicate that Luther is moving decisively away from *via moderna* constructions of grace. First, in his argument on Romans 5 he is careful to draw the close connection between sin and death. Sin is that which hands human beings over to death. Grace is thus the answer, or the counterpart, to this death.[9] As with Augustine, Luther sees Adam's sin as binding the individual into a kind of death cycle, committed only to doing works that can never merit before God.

This corresponds to his new view of baptism. Far from seeing baptism as reparative or restorative in terms of improving on a good that already exists in the baptismal subject, he sees baptism as finding its meaning in death and resurrection. Thus in a comment on Romans 6:4 he declares:

> They are baptized "into death," that is, toward death, which is to say, they have begun to live in such a way that they are pursuing this kind of death and reach out toward this their goal. For although they are baptized unto eternal life and the kingdom of heaven, yet they do not all at once possess this goal fully, but they have begun to act in such a way that they may attain to it—for Baptism was established to direct us toward death and through this death to life—therefore it is necessary that we come to it in the order which has been prescribed.[10]

This is a significant development because it moves Luther toward the point that he says is vital and that Erasmus focuses on: the bondage of the human will. Dead men tell no tales. Nor do they do anything else. If the human existential and religious problem is death, then only an external action on the part of someone more powerful than death can actually resolve the difficulty.

This points toward Luther's key breakthrough relative to the *pactum*. If human beings are dead in trespasses and sins, then what could possibly constitute fulfillment of the *pactum*'s condition? Luther gives the answer in his comment on Romans 2:

> The whole task of the apostle and of his Lord is to humiliate the proud and to bring them to a realization of this condition, to teach them that they need grace, to destroy their own righteousness so that in humility they will seek Christ and confess that they are sinners and thus receive grace and be saved.[11]

In other words, the condition of the *pactum*, the condition for the reception of grace, *is fulfilled by the individual coming to the realization that they are dead in their sins and can do nothing to merit God's grace.* It is that state of utter despair in oneself that provides the context for the reception of grace as a passive act. This is what we might call Luther's theology of humility: the idea that it is this despair of oneself and one's own ability that fulfills the condition of the *pactum*.

This is the theological shift that drove Luther at the time of the indulgence crisis of October 1517. In September of that year, in his Disputation against Scholastic Theology, Luther specifically attacked the theology of Gabriel Biel, arguing that the *pactum*'s condition could only be met by a prior act of grace rooted in God's predestination and manifested in a turning toward God.[12] Thus, the notion that God's grace could be bought by human effort was already anathema to him, a powerful point when it

came to the matter of indulgences as sold by Johann Tetzel.

Luther's Ninety-Five Theses are now regarded as an act of protest. This is certainly true in part. But more than a protest, they were what they professed to be: a call for a focused debate on the connection between the practice of selling indulgences in the manner of Tetzel and the church's official position on the same. In short, Luther wanted clarity of what exactly indulgences were and how they connected to the church's teaching on grace. While the Ninety-Five Theses contain no explicit attack on the traditional understanding of *pactum* theology, it is the theology of humility noted above that clearly undergirds a number of the theses, not least the very first: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."[13]

The issue became explicit in April 1518, when Luther presided over a disputation held at a chapter meeting of the Augustinian Order in the city of Heidelberg. Luther himself was the author of the disputed theses, which culminated in his famous distinction between the theologian of glory and the theologian of the cross. Prior to that, however, thesis 16 reads as follows: "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."[14]

In Luther's published explanation of the thesis he writes:

> On the basis of what has been said, the following is clear: While a person is doing what is in him, he sins and seeks himself in everything. But if he should suppose that through sin he would become worthy of or prepared for grace, he would add haughty arrogance to his sin and not believe that sin is sin and evil is evil, which is an exceedingly great sin. As Jer. 2[:18] says, "For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water" that is, through sin they are far from me and yet they presume to do good by their own ability.[15]

Underlying this explanation is Luther's understanding of sin. We noted above that he regards it as giving the sinner the status of death. Yet the sinner remains alive in the sense that she can still do things. Here we see Luther's existential understanding of sin as that which turns the person in on herself and thus renders her incapable of doing anything that does not ultimately feed the active, sinful nature. The idea that one could fulfill the condition of the *pactum* by doing what is in oneself, i.e., doing one's best, as the basis for obtaining grace, is thus nonsense. What freedom the sinner has is freedom between different types of acts of sinful self-righteousness, not the freedom to move toward God in even the most minimal way without the prior gracious action of God.

This anticipates what becomes explicit in *Bondage of the Will*, that there is not a bridge from wrath to grace. What is required is a sovereign, unilateral act of God. Luther makes this point at Heidelberg in his distinction between the theologian of glory and the theologian of the cross.[16] The theologian of glory makes the assumption that the way the world operates is a fundamentally sound guide to the way in which God operates. Since human love is reactive, drawn out by something that already exists and that attracts it, so God's love must be the same. A theologian of glory believes that justification, for example, must first of all be rooted in something within the individual. God would never declare someone to be righteous who was not actually righteous to some extent. And God

would never be gracious toward someone who had not first demonstrated they were worthy of grace at some level. This, of course, is the logic which underlies the idea of Biel's *pactum*.

The cross, however, stands as a direct contradiction to all of this. On the cross God acts in a manner that no human being would naturally have anticipated and that no human being can truly understand in their own power. Here the supreme sovereign Creator and ruler of the universe hides himself in weak, finite human flesh and dies on the hill at Calvary in a manner typically reserved for the criminal scum of the earth. The action of God is utterly unlike the logic of human action because it involves complete self-giving in a manner that is not dependent on receiving in return.

Luther is here articulating the position we find in Paul's letters to the church in Corinth. The cross is foolishness to the world around, a contradiction of all it holds dear, and yet it is the power of God to salvation.[17] Further, the radical work of Christ on the cross is such that the church and her constituent members are part of the new creation. This new creation is not perceptible through the outward criteria with which the world operates but is in fact a powerful reality visible only to the eyes of faith.[18]

The culmination of this theology is Luther's definition of love, which comes in the final theological thesis: "The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it."[19]

This is, of course, the classic anti-Pelagian understanding of love, which we also saw in Thomas Aquinas. God's love is prior and creative, and it roots election and the salvation that rests on it not in a foreseen intrinsic quality in the elect but in the prior sovereign and electing love of God. Here in the Heidelberg Disputation it comes at the very end of the argument, showing how such a view of God's love solves the problem of human rebellion and sinfulness and prevents the humility or faith of the Christian from functioning as merit. God's love is the foundation and cause of any humility or faith that the Christian may possess. It is also, as Luther stresses by juxtaposing it with human love in the thesis, the very antithesis of the latter. Thus, we are brought once again to the issue of knowledge, and of the morality of knowledge, which is key to the Christian. The theologian of glory thinks of God's love as reactive, like his own. Only the theologian of the cross can see that God's love is creative, like that of no other.

There is a sense in which Luther here stands in some continuity with his medieval voluntarist forebears, who would also have agreed with the fundamental unpredictability of God (from a human perspective) and thus with the need to focus on revelation. What Luther does, however, represents a distinct and important development in two particular ways. First, he makes the problem of the knowledge of God an acutely moral issue. We noted in Aquinas that the fall had an impact on human psychology, leaving the faculties disordered and thus throwing into doubt any human thoughts about God until they could be assessed by the standards of special revelation. Then, in later voluntarism the priority of God's will made him unpredictable. But with Luther the problem is intensely moral at its very root. Human beings want to create God in their own image so that they can then justify themselves before him. This is why the theses dealing with the theologians of glory and the cross are preceded by theses dealing with the power of the law of God to expose human impotence and to force individuals to cast themselves on God's mercy. Knowledge of God is a function of the human moral disposition, and the human being who is caught in his own sinfulness and turned inward on himself needs first of all to be broken by God.

This point is crucial to understanding Luther's theology in general and his view of grace in particular. The existence of the law does not imply that we have the ability to fulfill it. We are commanded to be holy in order to show us our obligation before God. When we strive to fulfill it, the law then becomes the means of exposing to us our absolute impotence before God and is thus used by the Lord to drive us to despair of ourselves by acknowledging before him our status as those who are morally dead. As we saw in Scripture and in the work of Augustine and Aquinas, grace is a response to this basic fact of fallen human existence. For Luther, grace is thus defined by Christ and the cross.

This is the second important development in Luther's thinking: his focus on the cross as the center of theology. It is there, in the broken finiteness of Jesus's flesh, as he hangs apparently powerless under the weight of God's curse and abandoned by his Father, that God acts in grace to save fallen humanity and in so doing reveals himself as gracious. This is revelation hidden under the form of weakness. Just as the work of Christ is a work of God's grace (for no mere creature could do it), so the understanding that individuals have of this work is also of God's grace. Men and women are so naturally wrapped up in their own theologies of glory that the cross makes no sense to them unless God gives them the eyes of faith. It is clearly akin to Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 1: the cross is foolish to Greeks and an offense to Jews. We might say people are naturally superficial in the strict sense of the word, dealing only with surface and appearance and not penetrating to the reality beneath. That penetration comes only through looking at the cross through the eyes of faith and thus only through God's gracious act, objectively at Calvary and subjectively in the heart of the individual. This also connects to Luther's theology of the word as rooted in late medieval nominalism. In other words, one knows the cross as power because the word of God *declares* it to be so.

Above all, this is not simply a matter of human finiteness or creatureliness. It is a matter of the basic moral character and status of human beings. Luther is with Paul: our attitude to the cross is emblematic of our standing before God because our attitude to the cross is in a very real sense our attitude toward the God who is crucified there. If we think it is foolishness or offensive, then we are perishing because those attitudes reflect hearts that are opposed to God and his grace. If we see it as the power of God to salvation, then that is only because God has graciously worked to give us faith to grasp that fact. Such is a work of the Spirit, not of unaided human reason. It is an act of God's grace.

Justification by Grace through Faith

At Heidelberg, Luther was clearly moving in the direction that culminated in his mature understanding of justification by grace through faith, which emerged around 1520 in works such as *The Freedom of the Christian Man*. We noted earlier that the conceptual framework of salvation is separable from the content of justification. Thus, one can have a predestinarian system that yet roots the formal cause of justification in qualities intrinsic to the person of the believer, as was the case with Augustine and Aquinas. For Luther, however, his understanding of predestination and his understanding of the formal cause of justification are intimately connected. This is because both are fundamentally external to the individual. For Luther, grace involves placing the believer's salvation outside himself, in the action of God. The very fact that justification for Luther is a declaration of God, a word that comes from the outside, underscores and intensifies the idea that salvation is all of grace.

At some point between 1516 and 1520, the notion of humility that Luther had developed as the

instrument of grasping God's grace was transformed into the notion of faith. The connection between the two is very close. If humility involves despairing of oneself and casting oneself on God for his mercy, then faith can be said to comprehend all of that and to accent the dimension of trust. It is not discontinuous with it but rather an enrichment and extension of it. It also sharpens the focus in Luther's theology on the word, on God's promise. As faith becomes the instrument of justification, so God's word, and indeed the declaration of that message in word and sacrament, becomes practically crucial in the life of the church.

The major statement of this position is Luther's 1520 treatise *On the Freedom of the Christian Man*. This was the year (1520) when Luther laid out in detail his initial thoughts of what the Reformation might look like, ethically, sacramentally, and politically. *The Freedom of the Christian Man* was his ethical treatise, looking at how his new understanding of salvation transformed the practical life of the believer. His argument here does nothing less than turn on its head the typical medieval Catholic position on works and justification. Justification precedes works as an act of God's grace so that works are subsequently motivated by gratitude for this unconditional favor.

Luther's most famous and dramatic statement of the nature of justification reads as follows:

> Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation. The soul is full of sins, death, and damnation. Now let faith come between them and sins, death, and damnation will be Christ's, while grace, life, and salvation will be the soul's; for if Christ is a bridegroom, he must take upon himself the things which are his bride's and bestow upon her the things that are his. If he gives her his body and very self, how shall he not give her all that is his? And if he takes the body of the bride, how shall he not take all that is hers?[20]

Here faith is the instrument of the joyful exchange (to use Luther's phrase) whereby Christ's righteousness freely becomes that of the sinner, and the sinner's sins become Christ's. The crucial point to notice is that the faith of the believer is not a constitutive part of this righteousness but merely the instrument by which the righteousness is grasped, and that by faith in the promise which is embodied in Christ. Faith unites to Christ, and Christ gives all that is necessary for the believer to stand justified before God. The declaration of God in justification is thus based not on anything the believer does but solely on what God has done in and through Christ, and that external to the individual. Luther's theology thus has at its core a fundamental antipathy to any notion of merit as playing a part in the believer's justification.

Grace, Christ, and Faith

This sets the stage for the clash with Erasmus and helps us understand why the matters raised by Erasmus were so important as far as Luther was concerned. First, we should note the existential significance of the argument. For Luther, if any element of justification lay decisively with the human will or with a human work, there could be no assurance of salvation. The individual would be left in a permanent state of uncertainty, as, we might say, the chain of assured salvation could only be as strong as its weakest link. Justification by an act of human will or by works would inevitably press the individual into looking within for assurance; and there was to be found nothing of absolute reliability. So Luther's argument that justification is based on Christ's objective works and

righteousness finds its counterpart in his emphasis on the sovereignty of God's will in salvation. Both are necessary for the Christian to have the real possibility of assurance. Put simply: the act of faith must itself be an act of God's sovereign grace.

When it comes to the theological arguments of the debate with Erasmus, several points are noteworthy. First, there is the issue of salvation being "in Christ." Nobody who makes any claim to be a Christian is going to disagree with such a statement, but for Luther it has a particularly radical implication. It excludes the whole idea that there can be free choice:

> When Christ is called the way, the truth, and the life [John 14:6], and that antithetically, so that whatever is not Christ is not the way but error, not the truth but a lie, not the life but death, then it necessarily follows that free choice, since it is neither Christ nor in Christ, is included in the error, the lie, and the death. Where and whence, then, have we that intermediate and neutral thing, the power of free choice, which although it is not Christ or the way, the truth, and the life, must still not be error, or a lie, or death? For unless everything said about Christ and grace were said antithetically, so as to be set over against its opposite—for instance, that outside of Christ there is nothing but Satan, apart from grace nothing but wrath, apart from light only darkness, apart from the way only error, apart from the truth only a lie, apart from life only death—what, I ask you, would be the point of all the discourses of the apostles and of Scripture as a whole? They would all be in vain, because they would not insist on the absolute necessity of Christ, which in fact is their chief concern; and they would not do so because some intermediate thing would be found, which of itself would be neither evil nor good, neither Christ's nor Satan's, neither true nor false, neither alive nor dead, perhaps even neither something nor nothing, and that would be called "the most excellent and exalted thing in the whole race of men"![21]

This statement is important. It points toward the primary concern of Luther, and of subsequent Reformers, in their articulation of grace and predestination: the outlawing of any notion of human merit in salvation. The ever-present danger in a theology that emphasizes justification by faith, and thus faith as the instrument of justification, is that faith itself will come to be regarded as a work or as somehow meritorious. The fact that *I* believe and thus receive Christ's righteousness might well imply that I have done something prior to my being in Christ that, in a very real sense, merits my salvation. Luther wishes to preclude that possibility by excluding the idea of my decision as being in any sense autonomous.

By setting Christ forth in this way, Luther offers one line of argumentation against the possibility of thinking of faith as meritorious. Outside Christ, there is nothing of any salvific good whatsoever. Thus, we might say that there is no intermediate state or neutral term between being out of Christ and in Christ. That which is instrumental in justification and salvation—the believer's faith—is itself grounded in the work of Christ. Even faith itself is an act of God's grace, bound up in Christ. One believes because one has been given faith as a gift of God's grace, and that itself is to be understood in terms of God's gracious action in and through Christ.

Of course, Luther was a good student of Augustine, and, like Augustine, he regarded the fallen human will as incapable of moving toward God.[22] Yet there is a significant difference between the

two theologians on this point. If Augustine tends to see the fall as the watershed in this regard, with the human will being free prior to this, Luther believes that it is not so much God's sovereign decree but his very being as the sovereign Creator and thus prior in every way to creation that eliminates the possibility of Adam's free will from the outset of creation:

> Granted foreknowledge and omnipotence, it follows naturally by an irrefutable logic that we have not been made by ourselves, nor do we live or perform any action by ourselves, but by his omnipotence. And seeing he knew in advance that we should be the sort of people we are, and now makes, moves, and governs us as such, what imaginable thing is there, I ask you, in us which is free to become in any way different from what he has foreknown or is now bringing about? Thus God's foreknowledge and omnipotence are diametrically opposed to our free choice, for either God can be mistaken in foreknowing and also err in action (which is impossible) or we must act and be acted upon in accordance with his foreknowledge and activity. By the omnipotence of God, however, I do not mean the potentiality by which he could do many things which he does not, but the active power by which he potently works all in all [cf. 1 Cor. 12:6], which is the sense in which Scripture calls him omnipotent. This omnipotence and the foreknowledge of God, I say, completely abolish the dogma of free choice.[23]

The logic here is simple, straightforward, and devastating: God foreknows that which he foreordains; if he foreknows something, he must therefore (logically) first foreordain it; therefore all things come to pass by God's foreordination.

The implications are profound and serve to make *Bondage of the Will* one of the most determinist treatises written in the history of the church. If one follows Luther in this argument, then one has to realize that the bondage of the will is an issue of human ontology, of the fact that we are creatures, and not the result of the fall. Further, it would seem hard to acquit God of full responsibility for evil. Granted, the origin of evil is a mystery—the serpent is simply there all of a sudden in the garden of Eden without any explanation—but other theologians, such as Augustine, have tried over the ages to at least nuance the relationship between God as sovereign and evil as a reality.

We perhaps do well, however, to understand Luther's religious motivation in this context, even as we may find his theological articulation of the matter to be somewhat blunt and unsatisfying. Luther's main concern is to deny any role to human merit in salvation and by doing so to offer a foundation for salvation on which true assurance can be built. In *Bondage*, Luther himself recalls how he strived for many years to achieve assurance of God's favor through his good works. He notes that this was a fool's errand, for as long as even one element in salvation remained dependent on him and his strength, he could never be certain that God would indeed ultimately be gracious to him.[24]

Thus, we here arrive at the antispeculative motivation for Luther's thinking. It is all about assurance of salvation, and his radical development of an apparently determinist framework for grace must be seen as part of this. One obvious implication, of course, is that God predestines some to eternal life and others to eternal death, a conclusion from which Luther does not shy away.

In his challenge to Luther's theology, Erasmus points to Ezekiel 18:23 and 32 where God declares that he takes no pleasure in the death of a sinner. Luther's response is dramatic. He draws a

distinction between God as he has revealed himself to be, as he is preached, where he is gracious and merciful and does not reprobate anybody (i.e., the revealed will of God), and God as he is in his majestic hiddenness, whereby he does indeed will the deaths of sinners (i.e., the hidden will of God).[25]

In one way, Luther has done no more here than build on the anti-Pelagian predestinarian structure that we noted in both Augustine and then in Aquinas. The difference between the one who is saved and the one who is not is rooted in an ultimate sense in the will of God. It is God's decision that discriminates between elect and nonelect. Yet Luther's approach is, for want of a better term, more brutal in that he seems to take a delight in contrasting the revealed will of God with the hidden will of God in a way others do not. Thus, for example:

> The Diatribe, however, deceives herself in her ignorance by not making any distinction between God preached and God hidden, that is, between the word of God and God himself. God does many things that he does not disclose to us in his word; he also wills many things which he does not disclose himself as willing in his word. Thus he does not will the death of a sinner, according to his word; but he wills it according to that inscrutable will of his. It is our business, however, to pay attention to the word and leave that inscrutable will alone, for we must be guided by the word and not by that inscrutable will.[26]

So God wills one thing according to his revealed will and contradicts it according to his hidden (and ultimately decisive) will. The danger here is that, in preserving the graciousness of grace in order to provide a solid foundation for assurance, Luther has inadvertently undermined the very thing he wishes to establish. For if God's revelation can itself be contradicted and is thus not the final word, then where is assurance to be found? It is arguable that the influence of late medieval voluntarism is still here at work in Luther's theology.

Luther's answer is typically paradoxical. He makes the dilemma itself into a component part of the definition of faith:

> Thus God hides his eternal goodness and mercy under eternal wrath, his righteousness under iniquity. This is the highest degree of faith, to believe him merciful when he saves so few and damns so many, and to believe him righteous when by his own will he makes us necessarily damnable, so that he seems, according to Erasmus, to delight in the torments of the wretched and to be worthy of hatred rather than of love. If, then, I could by any means comprehend how this God can be merciful and just who displays so much wrath and iniquity, there would be no need of faith. As it is, since that cannot be comprehended, there is room for the exercise of faith when such things are preached and published, just as when God kills, the faith of life is exercised in death.[27]

This is a valiant attempt at solving the problem and certainly points to Luther's understanding of justification as wholly an act of God, and that itself of grace. But it is ultimately unsatisfying because it presents the problem in Luther's formulation as the solution. Can the revealed God be trusted? The

answer, "Yes, even though he cannot be!" is problematic. Not to Luther, who reveled in such paradoxes and delighted in taunting his opponents with such. But the pastoral questions that such theology might well provoke are serious and not to be dismissed with a cavalier "So what?"

Conclusion

Martin Luther is in many ways the single most important figure in the theological history of Protestantism. He may not have been the greatest theologian or the most careful exegete, but his life and work set in place many of the concerns and priorities of the later Protestant traditions, Lutheran, Reformed, and evangelical. Certainly, his development of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith was crucial to the development of all five of the famous Reformation *solas*.

When it comes to grace, Luther stands firmly on the shoulders of Augustine. He even sees himself as fighting a modern-day battle against a revitalized Pelagianism. In pressing God's sovereignty, human depravity, and the need for unilateral, divine intervention, he is a good representative of a tradition stretching back to the early church.

He develops the tradition in two specific ways. First, his concern with grace and predestination is driven by his desire to exclude even the slightest hint of merit in salvation. What Luther does—and where he is very helpful to pastors and lay Christians today—is reveal how important is the connection between grace, Christ, and justification. One cannot simply preach that justification is by grace through faith without reflecting on the relationship between grace and faith. For Luther, to fail to make faith itself an act of God's grace is to subvert the whole notion, to smuggle a work in through the back door and to offer a view of salvation that is built in a very real sense on human merit. Theologically that derogates from the work of Christ, and pastorally it jeopardizes that most Protestant of pastoral distinctives, Christian assurance. If anything decisive at all is left in the power of the individual, be it faith or the performance of good works, then the chain of assured salvation is compromised such that assurance is effectively impossible.

Yet Luther also stands as a warning that, in our zeal for God's grace and to give him all the glory in salvation, we must beware of allowing our imaginations and our rhetoric to run away with us. The way in which Luther seems to delight in *Bondage of the Will* in emphasizing the dramatic opposition between the revealed God and the hidden God has the ironic and unfortunate consequence of undermining the very thing he wishes to establish: assurance built on the revelation of God as gracious in the Lord Jesus Christ. Certainly, this is a distinction that was well established in theology by Luther's time and that was also picked up by the Reformed. But to present one of the most difficult elements of the doctrine as if it were the most important part of it is problematic. The doctrine guards the mystery of God. It is therefore one thing to acknowledge that there are depths to God's being that we, as finite creatures, can never fathom; it is quite another for Luther to revel in setting those depths in such stark contrast to his revelation that God appears to contradict himself in a profound and fundamental way. Preachers of grace must operate with a firm confidence in who God has shown himself to be and an appropriate modesty concerning those things which he has chosen to keep hidden.

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1. For the life of Luther, see Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (London:

Forgotten Books, 2012); Martin E. Marty, *Martin Luther: A Life* (New York: Penguin, 2004). At a more scholarly but still accessible level, see Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and Devil*, trans. E. Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Scott H. Hendrix, *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015). The best introduction to his theology is Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

2. *LW* 33:294.

3. For a treatment of Luther on justification by faith alone, see Schreiner, *Faith Alone*, 37–53.

4. For an excellent discussion of the book's origins, argument, and influence, see Robert Kolb, *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method: From Martin Luther to the Formula of Concord* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005). For Luther on the clarity of Scripture, especially as expressed in *Bondage of the Will*, see Mark D. Thompson, *A Sure Ground on Which to Stand: The Relation of Authority and Interpretive Method in Luther's Approach to Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007).

5. The most recent scholarly example of this is Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2012).

6. The Latin phrase was *facienti quod in se est, Deus gratiam non denegat* ("to the one who does what is in him, God will not deny grace").

7. The standard discussion of Biel's theology and the *via moderna* remains the classic 1963 work by Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001).

8. On the history of the text, see *LW* 25:xii–xiii.

9. *LW* 25:49.

10. *LW* 25:312.

11. *LW* 25:191–92.

12. *LW* 31:9–16.

13. *LW* 31:25.

14. *LW* 31:40.

15. *LW* 31:50.

16. "19. That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened [Rom 1:20]. "20. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross. "21. A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is" (*LW* 31:40).

17. 1 Cor 1:18–25.

18. 2 Cor 5:16–21.

19. *LW* 31:41.

20. This is from *The Freedom of the Christian Man* (*LW* 31:351).

21. *LW* 33:281–82.

22. One of the interesting things about Luther is that he clearly understands the Reformation as a recapitulation of the earlier struggle against Pelagianism. There are certainly affinities between the

two, especially when we remember that Luther was initially taught by advocates of Gabriel Biel's *pactum* theology. Their softer view of human depravity and the will was arguably semi-Pelagian at least. But the struggle at the Reformation over justification is really a struggle over the instrumentality of justification and the manner in which the righteousness of Christ was applied to the believer. That was not the point at issue in the Pelagian controversy of Augustine's day.

23. *LW* 33:189.

24. "For my own part, I frankly confess that even if it were possible, I should not wish to have free choice given to me, or to have anything left in my own hands by which I might strive toward salvation. For, on the one hand, I should be unable to stand firm and keep hold of it amid so many adversities and perils and so many assaults of demons, seeing that even one demon is mightier, than all men, and no man at all could be saved; and on the other hand, even if there were no perils or adversities or demons, I should nevertheless have to labor under perpetual uncertainty and to fight as one beating the air, since even if I lived and worked to eternity, my conscience would never be assured and certain how much it ought to do to satisfy God. For whatever work might be accomplished, there would always remain an anxious doubt whether it pleased God or whether he required something more, as the experience of all self-justifiers proves, and as I myself learned to my bitter cost through so many years. But now, since God has taken my salvation out of my hands into his, making it depend on his choice and not mine, and has promised to save me, not by my own work or exertion but by his grace and mercy, I am assured and certain both that he is faithful and will not lie to me, and also that he is too great and powerful for any demons or any adversities to be able to break him or to snatch me from him" (*LW* 33:288–89).

25. *LW* 33:138–40.

26. *LW* 33:140.

27. *LW* 33:62–63.

CHAPTER 6

Grace Reformed: John Calvin and the Reformed Tradition

> Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.
>
> *Hebrews 4:16*

While Luther's conflict with Erasmus made explicit the Augustinian and predestinarian foundations of the Reformer's understanding of grace and indeed of justification, this was no monopoly of Luther or Lutheranism but a point which united the magisterial Protestants. It was also something that ultimately precipitated a division in both Lutheran and Reformed ranks. As Calvinists and Arminians were to divide in the early seventeenth century, so in the years immediately after Luther's death in 1546, the Lutheran church divided between the Gnesio ("real") Lutherans and the Phillipists (followers of Melanchthon). The former held tightly to Luther's position on the bondage of the will, but the latter moved along the more Erasmian lines that Melanchthon himself had advocated from the late 1520s onwards.[1]

In fact, from the middle of the sixteenth century the constructive reflection on grace in terms of predestination really passed rapidly from the Lutheran camp to that of the Reformed, where, in the popular imagination, it became synonymous with John Calvin, the French Reformer of Geneva. Yet it is clear that Calvin was merely one among many in his day who developed the thinking of Paul and Augustine on this matter. Calvin, Bullinger, and others did this in a manner which provided the basic framework for the Reformers' rejection of the idea of human merits as a basis for salvation before God. In doing so they thus laid the groundwork for the Reformed confessions, which still define the issue of grace for Reformed and Presbyterian churches to the present day.

Predestination in the Reformed Churches

A predestinarian understanding of grace pervaded the Reformed church confessions of the sixteenth century. Protestantism was, after all, an essentially Augustinian movement on the issue of grace and connected doctrines. Thus, article 17 of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England (1563) declares:

> Predestination to life is the everlasting purpose of God, whereby (before the foundations of the world were laid) He hath constantly decreed by His counsel, secret to us, to deliver from curse and damnation those whom He hath chosen in Christ out of mankind, and to bring them by Christ to everlasting salvation, as vessels made to honor.[2]

The Belgic Confession (1562) speaks similarly in its article 16:

> We believe that, all the posterity of Adam being thus fallen into perdition and ruin by the sin of our first parents, God then did manifest Himself such as He is; that is to say, merciful and just: merciful, since He delivers and preserves from this perdition all whom He in His eternal and unchangeable counsel of mere goodness has elected in Christ Jesus our Lord, without any respect to their works; just, in leaving others in the fall and perdition wherein they have involved themselves.[3]

Given the prevalence of the doctrine, it is thus helpful to allow one theologian in particular to shape our discussion. In this regard, it is perhaps an obvious choice to use John Calvin as the reference point. He is the best-known sixteenth-century Reformed theologian and one whose commentaries, sermons, and *Institutes* are still widely used today.

Having said that about Calvin, however, we do need to issue one caveat. Even as he was concerned for predestination and regarded it as a vital doctrine, it is important to note that the popular idea of him as *the* theologian of predestination is a myth. Large as he looms for Reformed theologians today, we must bear in mind that in his own day he was only one theologian among a number of influential thinkers in the Reformed tradition. It is true that his works have withstood the test of theological time better than any of his contemporaries, but in the sixteenth century he was at best merely first among equals.

His lack of basic originality on the matter of predestination is clear from the fact that his formulation of the doctrine occurs within a very conventional and traditional Christian framework. He is not an innovator and never desired to be such. Where he excels, and where he is therefore useful to us, is in the clarity and concise way in which he articulates the doctrine of predestination.

Calvin holds to all the basic elements of an Augustinian anti-Pelagian theology—original sin,[4] the power of human depravity over the human will, leading to a total moral inability to move toward God,[5] and thus the need for a decisive sovereign intervention on God's part. His *Catechism* of 1537, written comparatively early in his career—during his first Geneva period—makes all of these points clear. If God does not intervene in grace, then nobody will turn to him of their own accord. And that grace is rooted in God's predestining will.[6] Predestination is thus part of Calvin's overall catholic theology, and he would undoubtedly have been mortified to think that he was in any way inventing a doctrine or offering any kind of significant innovation on this, as on any other matter. Predestination for Calvin, as for Paul and Augustine and Luther, is the conceptual framework that guarantees the gratuitous nature of grace.

Calvin's most well-known work, containing his most famous articulation of grace and predestination, is his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, a book he first published in 1536 and then spent the rest of his life revising and expanding. It is often thought of as a systematic theology, but he

actually intended it to be a handbook to accompany his commentaries. Thus, he placed in the *Institutes* detailed discussion of theological topics to which he would frequently refer readers of his commentaries. This allowed him to keep his commentaries free of elaborate doctrinal digressions and thus more concise and readable.

This is an important point, because we need to bear in mind that the topical ordering in the *Institutes* is not driven by purely systematic concerns. Indeed, a good argument can be made that the ordering of topics is shaped more by the order in which Paul was understood to address them in Romans where they occur in chapters 9–11, after dealing with the more personal, existential aspects of salvation. For this reason, we should not draw too many hard and fast theological conclusions simply from the position of any doctrinal topic in the work because the relative placement of a doctrine may not in itself be doctrinally motivated.

Thus, it is not a particular reflection of the relative importance of the doctrine that Calvin's treatment of predestination in the 1559 *Institutes* occurs toward the end of book 3. Prior to that, he has discussed God as creator, God as redeemer, and the basic shape of the Christian life. That second section, Christ as redeemer, provides the clearest discussion of the foundation of grace and includes the background to his discussion of individual salvation. Only then does he address predestination. As noted above, this is arguably the result of the topical ordering that Calvin came to understand as Paul's in the book of Romans, probably through the influence of his friend Melanchthon's commentary.[7]

Nevertheless, predestination and its various corollary doctrines was a point of central concern to him throughout his career. He wrote a reply to Catholic theologian Pighius on the matter of the bondage of the will in 1543 and famously refuted the maverick theologian Jerome Bolsec on the point of election in his 1552 treatise *On the Eternal Predestination of God*. The latter work even achieved a kind of quasi-confessional status in Geneva when the Genevan authorities recognized it in 1552 as an important element of the city's reformation. All of this has served to reinforce a popular image of Calvin as *the* theologian of predestination. Thought it is still a caricature, it does at least reflect the fact that he clearly considered predestination to be an extremely important doctrine in undergirding his understanding of biblical grace.

Where Calvin is particularly helpful is in the close connection he draws between grace and the person of Christ. This is a key Pauline theme but one that can be neglected when our minds go first to the trickier questions about predestination, which, more often than not, cannot be answered anyway. As we noted in the first chapter, even Paul's answer to the riddles of predestination is ultimately doxological praise rather than theological resolution.

Calvin's first concern in considering election is not to speculate about the origin of evil or why one is chosen and another reprobated. It is rather to focus on Christ. He sees grace manifested most dramatically in the act and reality of the incarnation, describing the coming of God in the flesh as a mirror of God's grace, i.e., something in which the free favor of God can be clearly seen.[8] God's grace is shown preeminently by his action in coming in history. Following Augustine, he makes the point that the man Jesus Christ achieved an honor according to his human flesh in the incarnation that no mere human being could attain under their own efforts.[9] God's action in incarnating Christ is sovereign and not a cooperative exercise with human beings, a biblical point we noted in the first chapter. This then lays the foundation for Calvin's famous statement about Christ: that he is a mirror

of God's free election:

> In the very head of the Church we have a bright mirror of free election, lest it should give any trouble to us the members, viz., that he did not become the Son of God by living righteously, but was freely presented with this great honor, that he might afterwards make others partakers of his gifts.[10]

The election of the incarnate Christ by God demonstrates the freedom of God's gracious action and reveals his grace in the face of our finite and sinful helplessness. Christ is both the foundation of our free election and the supreme example of free election.

This christological focus on predestination finds its most remarkable statement in the Scots Confession of 1560, the principle author of which was Calvin's disciple John Knox. Chapter 8 is fascinating in this regard and is worth quoting in full:

> For that same eternal God and Father, who of mere grace elected us in Christ Jesus His Son before the foundation of the world was laid (Eph. 1), appointed Him to be our Head, our brother (Heb. 2), our pastor, and great bishop of our souls (John 10). But because the enmity betwixt the justice of God and our sins was such that no flesh by itself could or might have attained unto God, it behooved that the Son of God should descend unto us and take Himself a body of our body, flesh of our flesh, and bones of our bones: and so become the perfect mediator betwixt God and man, giving power to so many as believe in Him to be the sons of God (John 1). As He Himself does witness, "I pass up to my Father and unto your Father, to my God and unto your God" (John 20). By which most holy fraternity, whatsoever we have lost in Adam is restored to us again. And for this cause are we not afraid to call God our Father, not so much that He has created us (which we have common with the reprobate) as for that, that He has given to us His only Son, to be our brother, and given unto us grace to acknowledge and embrace Him for our only mediator, as before was said. It behooved further the Messiah and Redeemer to be very God and very man because He was to undergo the punishment due for our transgressions (Isa. 53), and to present Himself in the presence of His Father's judgment as in our person to suffer for our transgression and disobedience by death, to overcome him that was author of death. But because the only Godhead could not suffer death, neither yet could the only manhood overcome the same, He joined both together in one person that the weakness of the one should suffer and be subject to death (which we had deserved), and the infinite and invincible power of the other, to wit, of the Godhead, should triumph and purchase to us life, liberty, and perpetual victory. And so we confess and most undoubtedly believe.[11]

What is so interesting here is that there is no mention of any decree of predestination or election. The focus is entirely on the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. God's election is first and foremost his choice of Christ as the God-man to be the great mediator between God and sinners. Election needs to be understood as focused on Jesus.

This is useful because it serves to underline the point that grace cannot be conceived of in abstract

terms, as if it were a mere sentiment or a whim of God. As we have noted before, in a sentimental age such as ours, there is a temptation to reduce theological terms to superficial emotions. Love becomes a feeling, and grace becomes simply the act of turning a blind eye to sin and wickedness in someone. That is not grace as the Bible teaches it. Yes, there is a superabundance of mercy toward us in God's grace, but this is rooted in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The point of grace is that it is a divine response to human sin that has a concrete manifestation in God's actions in history. Certainly it has an individual reference for each and every Christian, but first and foremost it is demonstrated in God acting in Christ in human history. God's gracious response to our sin cannot be separated from the work of Christ without completely losing its significance. God's response to my sin is not simply to forget it or act as if it never happened. No, his response is Christ. God's favor to me is Christ. God's love for me is Christ. And thus election and predestination cannot be separated from the work of Christ without becoming apparently arbitrary abstractions.

In the *Institutes*, Calvin introduces the topic of individual election of sinners by observing that not all respond in faith to the preaching of the gospel. When the word is proclaimed, some believe while others are indifferent or hardened by the proclamation. For Calvin, the difference is not an intrinsic one. It is not that some are more naturally inclined to grasp the word by faith than others. All are embraced under the same guilt and under the same moral bondage. It is only an act of the Spirit that brings faith; and the Spirit acts only on those whom the Lord has chosen to bring to Christ.[12]

This might seem at first glance to be a depressing doctrine for preachers in particular and perhaps Christians in general. But the point is extremely encouraging for both, for it means that the results of preaching are not dependent on the efforts of the preacher or the moral strength of the hearer. Ultimately, the salvation of those to whom a preacher declares the word does not depend on his own eloquence or skills in argument. It depends solely upon the sovereign work of God by his Holy Spirit convicting hearers of the truth of the word to which they are listening. Knowing that fact should strengthen the confidence of any preacher entering the pulpit.

The second introductory point Calvin makes on predestination is that an understanding of predestination and election[13] is vital if grace is to be properly understood:

> We shall never feel persuaded as we ought that our salvation flows from the free mercy of God as its fountain, until we are made acquainted with his eternal election, the grace of God being illustrated by the contrast, viz., that he does not adopt all promiscuously to the hope of salvation, but gives to some what he denies to others.[14]

Thus, for Calvin the purpose of explicating the doctrine is not to promote speculation about the matter but to undergird the gracious nature of salvation. Salvation is all of God, and that point is vital. At the time of the Reformation, there were those who, like Melanchthon, argued that the doctrine should be essentially kept out of the pulpit because it would lead to confusion. Calvin was emphatically opposed to such a view and stood in the line of thinking on the matter which stemmed from Paul. Election and predestination, mysterious as they are, are first and foremost there to underline that salvation is in origin a sovereign act of God. Therefore, the doctrine should be preached.

This was Luther's basic theological point in *Bondage of the Will*. For grace to be grace, there

must be predestination, or else some form of human merit is being smuggled back into the picture. The existence of Augustinian predestinarian theology prior to the Reformation indicates that the Protestant understanding of justification is formally separable from its understanding of predestination. Nevertheless, in the minds of men such as Luther and Calvin, the connection between the two is extremely close. If justification is all of God, then salvation is by grace and predestination must be true and proclaimed to be so.

Indeed, as Calvin broaches the topic of predestination in the *Institutes*, he moves immediately to warn the reader about making two errors: too confidently probing into the mysteries of God and indulging in unwarranted speculation, or being too shy and reticent to do justice to what the Bible actually says. The Christian is to plot a course between these two extremes, cleaving closely to Scripture so as to be neither too speculative nor too coy. Calvin was scarcely unique on this point. This was typical of the Reformers, who were aware that the doctrine could be used either to foster despair or, more importantly, presumption, a point made with some force in chapter 11 of the Second Helvetic Confession.[15]

Nevertheless, Calvin does not regard this caution against speculation as preventing him from defining predestination in a manner that clearly includes reprobation:

> By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God, by which he determined with himself whatever he wished to happen with regard to every man. All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and, accordingly, as each has been created for one or other of these ends, we say that he has been predestinated to life or to death.[16]

Yet even when Calvin states such a dramatic doctrine, it is important to remember that he is not an innovator on this point. In fact, what is remarkable about this definition, given Calvin's reputation, is that it is really very conventional. Yes, it is true that he explicitly states a doctrine of double predestination in a way that is quite dramatic, but it is in no way an exceptional or original definition. Even that Calvin appears to make predestination a clearly theological doctrine at this point and does not build it on the doctrine of original sin and of humanity's moral problem is not particularly original. Luther does much the same in *On the Bondage of the Will*, and we have clear precedents in the Middle Ages among theologians such as Gottschalk, Thomas Bradwardine, John Wycliffe, and Jan Hus.

Double predestination was not a matter of confessional consensus among the Reformed. It is true that the 1552 adoption by the city authorities of Calvin's work *On the Eternal Predestination of God* made the doctrine normative for pastors within the Genevan jurisdiction. Yet Bullinger's Zurich took a softer line, as the rather vague and noncommittal language of chapter 10 of the Second Helvetic Confession shows when it references those who are not elect.[17] Here, Bullinger is careful only to speak of predestination to salvation. The question of reprobation is left open. Of course, part of the reason is polemical context. Geneva adopted Calvin's position in the wake of his conflict with Jerome Bolsec, a theologian who seemed to be equivocating on predestination as a means of smuggling merit back into the salvific equation. In such circumstances, a sharper definition of the matter was inevitably more attractive to those wishing to keep out such deviant thinking. The key thing

was always the protection of the gratuitous nature of grace.

Polemical context also worked in the other direction as well. One strange fact is the lack of any reference to predestination in the Heidelberg Catechism, one of the great confessional texts of the Reformation church and one which continues to hold authority in Reformed churches of German and Dutch origin today. The catechism certainly has the basic doctrines that comport with predestination. Human beings are fallen and impotent to effect their own salvation (question 5), and they must be regenerated before they can do any good (question 8), but there is no explicit statement of any eternal foundation for the enacting of individual salvation.

The reason for this is actually less theological and more political. Frederick III, the Elector Palatine in 1563 who commissioned the catechism, was attempting to forge an alliance at Heidelberg University between the Melanchthonians and the Reformed. The former would have objected to a vigorous statement of predestination being included in the document, as they would then have been unable to subscribe to it.

The Heidelberg Catechism is an example, therefore, both of the ecumenical pragmatism that sometimes underlies the formulation of confessional documents and also of the fact that a high view of God's grace could be articulated in a document that fails to draw out the implications of that view for predestination. Nevertheless, silence on the doctrine is not repudiation of the doctrine, and it is clear that a consistent application of the catechism's other doctrines requires some kind of predestinarian framework in order to make grace really gracious and salvation actual, even if this is not made explicit in a clear formulation of predestination.

Predestination and Assurance

Discussion of the Heidelberg Catechism leads us to the point in the Reformers' thinking where they do actually make a significant new pastoral contribution on the matter of grace and predestination.

The major difference between earlier renderings of the doctrine and those in the Reformation really connects to the doctrine of assurance. Assurance is central to Reformation theology, as is so clear from question 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism, which establishes assured comfort as the purpose of the catechism's teaching.[18] Indeed, Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck was correct in identifying this as the single important change in the doctrine that the Reformation introduced.[19]

In the Middle Ages, assurance was simply not an issue. This is true even for theologians who are often thought of as proto-Protestants or forerunners of the Reformers. For example, Wycliffe and Hus did not consider assurance to be a realistic possibility, or even particularly desirable, for the typical believer. On this point, such otherwise radical theologians remained stubbornly in the Middle Ages. It was at the Reformation, with its remarkable emphasis on justification by grace through faith, that assurance became a central part of Christian expectation and experience.

The significance of this for the treatment of predestination is obvious. If the reasons for God's election are hidden from human eyes, then does that not undermine the possibility of assurance? Certainly modern theologian Karl Barth thought so. For him, the decree of election as formulated in the Augustinian and especially the Reformed tradition cast a long shadow over God's revelation in Christ and thereby undercut the possibility of trusting in Christ. For how could one trust Christ until one was sure one was elect and therefore had a warrant to trust him? For Barth, an alleged legalism

and mysticism were the inevitable results.[20]

This is a tough question to answer, for there is a sense in which Barth has a point. One must be careful in the way one articulates predestination lest, in an attempt to underscore the gratuitous nature of grace, one actually ends up eclipsing grace with the shadow of an apparently arbitrary and despotic God. That is arguably where Luther's thinking tends in some of his more dramatic flourishes in *Bondage of the Will*. Yet it is clear that all of the great Reformers regarded the Augustinian doctrines of grace and predestination as vital to Christian assurance, not inimical to it. Thus, for example, article 17 of the Thirty-Nine Articles says this:

> The godly consideration of predestination and our election in Christ, is full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort to godly persons, and such as feel in themselves the working of the Spirit of Christ, mortifying the works of the flesh, and their earthly members, and drawing up their mind to high and heavenly things, as well because it doth greatly establish and confirm their faith of eternal salvation to be enjoyed through Christ, as because it doth fervently kindle their love towards God.[21]

The key phrase here, of course, is "godly consideration," which is intended (as the rest of the article makes clear) to point the believer away from the kind of speculative questions that attempt to probe behind that which God has revealed and into the hidden will of God. The Canons of Dordt (1618) express the same idea:

> The sense and certainty of this election afford to the children of God additional matter for daily humiliation before Him, for adoring the depth of His mercies, for cleansing themselves, and rendering grateful returns of ardent love to Him who first manifested so great love towards them. The consideration of this doctrine of election is so far from encouraging remissness in the observance of the divine commands or from sinking men in carnal security, that these, in the just judgment of God, are the usual effects of rash presumption or of idle and wanton trifling with the grace of election, in those who refuse to walk in the ways of the elect.[22]

Thus, far from causing fear, the general Reformed assumption is that election brings comfort when the object of godly consideration. Calvin offers an exposition of what this godly consideration is, for he does not simply want the doctrine of election taught in order to underscore God's grace. He also considers it to be vital to Christian assurance. As with Luther, he believes that if any aspect of salvation lies decisively in the hands of the creature, then there can be no assurance, for the chain of salvation is only as strong as its weakest link. Yet he also knows that speculation regarding predestination is a dangerous pastime. In fact, Calvin says that those who rush into such speculation will find themselves hopelessly lost in an "inextricable labyrinth."[23]

Instead, Calvin argues that election is only to be contemplated *in Christ*. Picking up on the Pauline identification of Christ with the grace of God, and that election is "in Christ," he points the Christian toward contemplating election only as it is revealed in the incarnate Son of God. Indeed, in contrast to the labyrinth into which speculation leads, Christ is the "mirror" in which we can

contemplate our election:

> If we seek for the paternal mercy and favor of God, we must turn our eyes to Christ, in whom alone the Father is well pleased (Mt. 3:17). When we seek for salvation, life, and a blessed immortality, to him also must we retake ourselves, since he alone is the fountain of life and the anchor of salvation, and the heir of the kingdom of heaven. Then what is the end of election, but just that, being adopted as sons by the heavenly Father, we may by his favor obtain salvation and immortality? How much soever you may speculate and discuss you will perceive that in its ultimate object it goes no farther. Hence, those whom God has adopted as sons, he is said to have elected, not in themselves, but in Christ Jesus (Eph. 1:4); because he could love them only in him, and only as being previously made partakers with him, honor them with the inheritance of his kingdom. But if we are elected in him, we cannot find the certainty of our election in ourselves; and not even in God the Father, if we look at him apart from the Son. Christ, then, is the mirror in which we ought, and in which, without deception, we may contemplate our election. For since it is into his body that the Father has decreed to ingraft those whom from eternity he wished to be his, that he may regard as sons all whom he acknowledges to be his members, if we are in communion with Christ, we have proof sufficiently clear and strong that we are written in the Book of Life.[24]

Calvin's view here is similar in many ways to Luther's in *Bondage of the Will*, where he emphasizes the need to look on God as clothed in the flesh of Christ as the means of beholding the grace and mercy of God, even against the background of predestination. It also comports with statements in confessional documents, such as the Second Helvetic Confession, that emphasized the need for the believer to see Christ as God's verdict in election and thus their status in him as his verdict on them.[25]

Some will no doubt object that Barth's criticism—that the decree of election casts a shadow over Christ—still holds good, and there is a sense in which this is true. We do not know God's mind, and we do not have direct access to the particulars of the decree of election. Yet there seem to be only three basic ways of handling this. One could argue for universalism: God's election in Christ is unconditioned by any particularist decree, and thus all are ultimately saved. While Barth himself rejected this, it is arguable that his thought presses heavily in this direction, and it has certainly become the position of many of his followers and interpreters. Yet this view is impossible to square with biblical teaching, where the urgency of turning to God and the possibility of being lost for all eternity are stressed as being very real and very significant (e.g., Luke 16:19–31; Acts 17:30–31; 1 Thess 1:9–10; 2 Pet 3:9–10; Rev 16:8–10).

Second, one can argue that Christ is conditioned not by any prior particularist decree but by human response. In short, Christ's death makes grace universally available to all, to be freely grasped by the individual by faith. This, of course, requires that one believes that human beings with the help of prevenient grace are able to make such a move but also resist the same if they wish. It also makes personal salvation depend on the personal action of belief. Thus, assurance could well tend toward a more introspective or even legalistic foundation. This is, of course, the line of thinking which broadly

characterizes what we call Arminianism.

Third, one can assume that God is a God who, while both just and merciful, yet prefers mercy to justice, as is revealed in his election throughout history, his tender dealings and patience with his people, and his supreme act of grace in Christ. In Christ he sets forth his merciful intentions in such a way that none who come to him by faith will be cast aside. Yes, it is true that the decree of predestination is still there in the background, but the great promises of God's bounteous grace, linked to his saving action in Christ, give full grounds and confidence for believing that any who look to him for salvation will be saved.

In short, even when viewed in the most negative way, the Reformed position on Christ and the decree would seem to comport better with the biblical material as a whole, and actually provide a better ground for assurance, than either of the other possibilities.

Predestination after Calvin

In the decades after Calvin, debates about predestination became more nuanced. For example, the question of the basis of reprobation came to the fore in discussion between infra- and supralapsarians. The former argued that God reprobated human beings on the assumption of their sinfulness, the latter prior to their sinfulness. To put the question these schemes sought to answer more clearly: When God in eternity chose whom to elect and whom to reprobate, was he looking at the human race logically before it had fallen or after it had fallen? For example, when God decides in eternity to elect John Smith to eternal life, is he thinking of John Smith as a sinner, or is he thinking simply of John Smith as a human being without regard to his moral state? If God is thinking of him as a sinner, then Smith's election is a response to his sin. If God is thinking of Smith simply as a human being, then Smith's election, whatever else it might be, is not a response to his sin.

The distinction might seem somewhat speculative. Indeed, for those unfamiliar with the debates, the terminology in itself is no doubt confusing. But there are important concerns here. Both sides were attempting to preserve something of what they saw as the biblical teaching on grace. Infralapsarianism underscored the point that God's grace is a *response* to human sin. It is not just an abstraction or a sentiment; nor is it arbitrary. Rather, it is actually a positive act of God in the light of human rebellion. Supralapasarianism arose out of a desire to rule absolutely out of bounds any notion of foreseen merit playing any part in election. It thus connected to the Reformation emphasis on grace as *free* and *sovereign*.

Both views also involved certain difficulties. Infralapsarianism does carry with it the risk that it could be interpreted as allowing for some elective discrimination on the basis of intrinsic merit or demerit in those elected or reprobated. Further, while it attempts to ameliorate the problem of the fall and its place within the plan of God, the fact that all the Reformed regarded God as sovereign over all things really meant that the distinction could be seen as a rather specious one.

Supralapsarianism, however, seems to defend God's sovereignty by creating a system in which God is very much the author of sin and in which the fall and all the evil it brings in its wake are merely instruments for bringing about God's glory. Also, the idea that reprobation is necessary in order to bring about a full revelation of God's righteousness is difficult to justify from Scripture. In fact, the scheme seems to inject a harsh and unknowable arbitrariness into God. Opponents of the Reformed understanding of grace would see this as inevitable, given the Reformed view of God's

sovereignty and, indeed, it was supralapsarian-ism that helped to precipitate the great breach in Reformed theology, between so-called Calvinists and Arminians.[26]

The anti-Pelagian view of grace that we find in Calvin, Bullinger, and other magisterial Reformers came under increasing pressure in the latter part of the sixteenth century. In Cambridge in the 1590s, Peter Baro was accused of teaching that deviated from the Reformation line and conceded too much to human free will, weakening predestination and compromising on the issue of the saints' perseverance. The background to this was Archbishop John Whitgift commissioning William Whitaker, then Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, to compose the so-called Lambeth Articles (1595), which elaborated on various issues such as predestination and perseverance. The nine articles asserted double predestination, denied that this was on the basis of foreseen merits, affirmed perseverance, and emphasized the irresistibility of grace. While the articles never achieved official confessional status in Anglicanism, Whitgift regarded them as an explanation of Anglican doctrine. They were also later incorporated as a whole into the Irish Articles of 1615, composed by James Ussher. Yet, as Anglicanism sought to sharpen its confessional position on predestination, almost inevitably it provoked reactions from figures such as Baro.

If Baro represented a growing spirit of the age, then James Arminius and his followers came to embody this in a far more sophisticated way as they launched a theological assault on the position of men such as Calvin and his successor, Theodore Beza. Arminius, a Dutch man, was a student of Beza but came to repudiate the supralapsarian theology of his teacher. Instead, he offered a modified understanding of predestination that, while appearing to rest on only slight theological shifts, effectively overturned the Reformed understanding of grace and predestination.

While much popular Arminian opposition to predestination today is motivated by little more than a heartfelt belief that predestination is somehow unfair, Arminius and his immediate followers were highly sophisticated theologically and philosophically, and recent scholarship has demonstrated that their relationship to Reformed orthodoxy was complicated. At the heart of Arminius's repudiation of the predestinarianism of his teacher was a reconstruction of the notion of grace. He adopted the basic Augustinian distinction between prevenient and subsequent grace but deviated from the Reformed tradition by arguing that prevenient grace was resistible, not irresistible, as those such as Beza had argued.[27] This, of course, also points to Arminius's synergism: salvation becomes a matter of the individual cooperating with God's grace in a manner in which the individual always has a decisive role. He also combined this with an understanding of God's knowledge that drew on the Jesuit notion of middle knowledge. This is the idea that God knows all the possible worlds that could exist, and God merely provides the possibilities for certain actions rather than specifying them by his prior will. God then chose on the basis of this knowledge which world he wished to create, i.e., the one where all of the outcomes he desired became reality.[28]

In so doing, Arminius and his followers were able to present an apparently vigorous doctrine of grace combined with one of providence: grace is necessary for salvation, and God does decide which world comes into being and thus which people are saved. Yet it is actually those people who freely decide for God.

From a traditional Reformed perspective, there are a number of problems with the views of Arminius and his followers. First, Calvin and others held that the nature of original sin and human depravity is such that it really does not matter how many possible worlds God can envisage. In none

of them where the fall has occurred can human beings turn to him without a decisive and irresistible act of grace on God's part. But there is also a logical problem. If God decides to create the world where, at a certain point in time, I freely cooperate with his grace and grasp Christ by faith, am I free *not* to do that at the same point in time? Apparently not, as that alternative world has already been excluded by an act of God's will. This raises the question of whether the Arminian resolution of the problem really does avoid the problems typically associated with theological determinism. It also suggests that open theism, the idea that God does not know some or all of the future, is the only real alternative to an anti-Pelagian approach because only open theism can truly defend the kind of human freedom that Arminianism apparently wishes to preserve (a freedom whereby humanity can always choose otherwise; i.e., libertarian freedom).[29]

Historically, Arminianism became a rallying point for a theological and political cause in the Netherlands that summarized its position in a manifesto involving five points: conditional election, universal atonement (not that this implied eschatological universalism, merely that Christ died for all), universal human depravity (although not such as prevents cooperation with grace), resistible grace, and perseverance on the basis of cooperation with grace. In opposition to these, the Synod of Dordt affirmed five doctrinal points: election by divine will and not based on foreseen merits, the particular efficacy of Christ's death, total depravity, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints—the so-called Five Points of Calvinism.

We need to acknowledge that the relationship to Reformed theology and Arminianism as taught by Arminius and his immediate successors is rather complicated. Modern scholarship tends to see classical Arminianism as a modification of Reformed theology, albeit an ultimately dramatic modification, rather than a simple repudiation of the same.[30] It is probably also true to say that most modern Arminians are not sophisticated heirs of the kind of classical theistic approach of Jacob Arminius but are typically those who instinctively think that the view of predestination espoused by the magisterial Reformers is somehow unfair. They also differ from Arminius in that they generally do not work out all of the implications for their doctrines of God, creation, fall, and redemption.

Conclusion

It should be evident that the Reformed were in no way innovators when it came to the doctrine of grace and its connection to predestination. They stood as heirs of Augustine, in line with great medieval theologians such as Thomas Aquinas, and alongside Martin Luther. Further, while one can be predestinarian without believing in justification by grace through faith, the consensus of the Reformers and their principal confessional documents seems to indicate that *they did not regard it as possible to believe consistently in such justification without being predestinarian*. Attempts to argue otherwise, such as those of the Phillipists in Lutheranism and the Arminians in the Reformed world, led to vigorous opposition and, in the case of the Reformed, to increasing exploration and elaboration of the doctrine of predestination.

There is a significant lesson there for us today on two fronts. First, our Protestant heritage is first and foremost a catholic heritage. Our forefathers drew very consciously on the ongoing stream of Augustinian thought that provided a core to the theology of the West. We need gratefully to acknowledge this and to realize that we can indeed learn from those who may stand outside our narrow traditions but who yet stand behind them in a very important way.

Second, we need constantly to reflect on how the doctrines we do believe in connect together. There is a complexity to the Christian faith, and we therefore need to be sensitive to how one doctrine influences—and is influenced by—others. The formal separability of grace, predestination, and justification does not mean that they are really separable, or separable with impunity. If that were so, then the debate between the Reformed and the Arminians would have been a matter of trivial implications. History indicates that this is not the case. Our view of grace and predestination shapes everything. For Protestants, this is especially important at a pastoral level when we realize that our view of grace is vitally connected to our understanding of Christian assurance. That is perhaps the most important lesson we can learn from the Reformers on this matter. It is because salvation is all of God, and is revealed so perfectly in Christ, that we can be assured of our status before God. And on that, the whole of practical Protestant piety depends.

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1. That Melanchthon clearly deviated from the strict line laid down in *On the Bondage of the Will* and yet was never subject to the kind of excoriation at the hands of Luther that Erasmus suffered has been a source of some perplexity for historians since then. Certainly the affinities between Melanchthon and Erasmus are clear. Perhaps the best explanation for Luther's silence is that of friendship, a matter that often transcends rational historical analysis.

2. James T. Dennison Jr., *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation,* 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 2:759–60.

3. Ibid., 2:433–34.

4. "At first man was formed in the image and resemblance of God in order that man might admire his Author in the adornments with which he had been nobly vested by God and honor him with proper acknowledgment. But, having trusted such a great excellence of his nature and having forgotten from whom it had come and by whom it subsisted, man strove to raise himself up apart from the Lord. Hence man had to be stripped of all God's gifts of which he was foolishly proud, so that, denuded and deprived of all glory, he might know God whom man, after having been enriched by his liberalities, had dared to despise. As a result, this resemblance to God having been effaced in us, we all who descend from the seed of Adam are born flesh from flesh" (Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 1:356–57).

5. "The Scripture testifies often that man is a slave of sin. The Scripture means thereby that man's spirit is so alienated from the justice of God that man conceives, covets, and undertakes nothing that is not evil, perverse, iniquitous, and soiled" (ibid., 1:357).

6. "The seed of the word of *God* takes root and brings forth fruit only in those whom the Lord, by his eternal election, has predestined to be children and heirs of the heavenly kingdom" (ibid., 1:366).

7. For a discussion of this, see Richard A. Muller, "Establishing the *Ordo Docendi*: The Organization of Calvin's *Institutes*, 1536–1559," in *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 118–39.

8. *Institutes* 2.14.5.

9. Ibid., 2.14.7. Cf. Augustine, *The City of God* 10.29.1.

10. *Institutes* 3.22.1 (translation used here and hereafter is John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. Henry Beveridge [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953]).

11. Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 2:191–92.

12. *Institutes* 3.21.1.

13. I am here using "predestination" to refer to the general category of God's predetermination of the eternal destiny of human beings and thus as covering both election and reprobation. I use "election" more narrowly, to refer to God's decision to choose a subset of the human race for eternal life.

14. *Institutes* 3.21.1 (Beveridge).

15. "Wherefore we do not allow of the wicked speeches of some who say, Few are chosen, and seeing I know not whether I am in the number of those few, I will not defraud my nature of her desires. Others there are which say, If I am predestinated and chosen of God, nothing can hinder me from salvation, which is already certainly appointed for me, whatever I do at any time; but if I am in the number of the reprobate, no faith or repentance will help me, seeing the decree of God cannot be changed: therefore, all teachings and admonitions are to no purpose" (Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 2:826).

16. *Institutes* 3.21.5 (Beveridge).

17. "Therefore, though not for any merit of ours, yet not without a means, but in Christ, and for Christ, did God choose us; and they who are now engrafted into Christ by faith, the same also were elected. But such as are without Christ were rejected, according to that saying of the apostle, 'Prove yourselves, whether ye be in the faith. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates? (2 Cor. 13:5)'" (Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 2:825).

18. "What is your only comfort in life and in death? That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ, who with His precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, and redeemed me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that all things must work together for my salvation. Wherefore, by His Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live unto Him" (ibid., 2:771).

19. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–8), 2:363.

20. See the discussion in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 2.2 (pp. 112–14).

21. Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 2:760.

22. Ibid., 4:124.

23. *Institutes* 3.21.1 (Beveridge).

24. Ibid., 3.24.5.

25. "We, therefore, condemn those who seek other than in Christ, whether they are chosen from all eternity, and what God has decreed of them before all beginning. For men must hear the gospel preached and believe it. If you believe and are in Christ, you may undoubtedly reckon that you are elected. For the Father has revealed unto us in Christ His eternal sentence of predestination, as we even now showed out of the apostle in 2 Timothy 1:9–10" (Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 2:826).

26. Not all Reformed theologians conformed to the strictures of the supra-infra debate. John Owen (1616–83) does not appear to have been particularly interested in it, and Herman Bavinck explicitly rejects the distinction, arguing that neither approach does full justice to the range of relevant biblical texts (Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:381–92).

27. See *The Works of Jacob Arminius*, trans. James Nichols and W. R. Bagnall, 3 vols. (Auburn, NY: Derby and Miller, 1853), 3:512. For a critique of Arminius and a variety of Arminianisms, specifically when it comes to prevenient grace, see Matthew Barrett, *Salvation by Grace: The Case for Effectual Calling and Regeneration* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013).

28. See Arminius, *Works*, 1:448.

29. This is a very important point that was made during the open theism controversy at the start of the twenty-first century. E.g., Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000); John Piper, Justin Taylor, and Paul Kjoss Helseth, eds., *Beyond the Bounds: Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003).

30. See R ichard A. Muller, *God, Creation, and Providence in the Thought of Jacob Arminius: Sources and Directions of Scholastic Protestantism in the Era of Early Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991); also Keith D. Stanglin and Thomas H. McCall, *Jacob Arminius: Theologian of Grace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

PART 2

Sola Gratia in the Church

CHAPTER 7
The Church

> And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.
>
> *Ephesians 1:22–23*

It should be clear by now that grace is a profoundly existential matter. The life of Augustine indicates that. Grace was something that overwhelmed him. It does not simply explain how the Creator and his fallen creatures are brought back into communion with each other. It also grips Christians at the deepest level of their beings. The Christian can no more talk of grace in cool, objective, abstract terms than a husband can discuss his love for his wife in such a manner. Grace should hold us in its grip in such a way that our whole being is affected. That which brings us from being under God's wrath to being his beloved children is surely something that we cannot contemplate in a dispassionate manner.

That grace is so existentially important is part of what leads to this second section of the book. The reader might be surprised to find the culmination of this volume to be chapters on the church, on preaching, on the sacraments, and on prayer. But this makes perfect sense, for these are the means by which God acts in the here and now in grace toward us, and these are things in and through which we encounter God's grace and by which God's grace should seize hold of us. To think of grace is not to think of the theological equivalent of a quadratic equation or a chemical formula. To think of grace is to be personally confronted with God, and thus no account of grace can omit discussion of the place, ways, and means of that confrontation.

If you are surprised by this second section, then you are probably not alone. If there is one area where much of modern Protestantism consistently deviates from its Reformation roots and does so often unwittingly, it is in the matter of the means of grace, and especially of church and grace. Even the typical vocabulary that is often used about the church betrays this: the phrase "doing church" and its cognates is a standard part of modern evangelical Protestant parlance. We ask how we do church; we look for new ways to do church; we wonder how other people do church. In each case, the church is presented as something that is an act of Christians, presumably in response to what God has done in Christ.

This way of thinking is highly significant. Like many positions that are adopted for reasons that

may not appear at first glance to be theological, it actually rests on a set of profoundly theological principles. One's understanding of what church is and who is the agent when it comes to "doing church" speaks eloquently of one's theological convictions, whether consciously held or not. Throughout this book, we have seen how the great theologians of the church all regarded God's grace as foundational to Christianity. It is because God has acted and acts that we are Christians. And this must shape our understanding of the church—not simply what it is in theory but how it is manifested in practice.

The Reformers and the Church as an Act of God's Grace

While the Reformers did move away from the very strong institutional understanding of the church that we find in the Middle Ages, rooted as it was in a very high sacramentalism and an adherence to the concept of the apostolic succession of the episcopacy and priesthood, the Reformers nonetheless retained a very high view of the church as an organization with specific governance and tools. Above all, they knew that the church, even considered as an institution, was herself an act of God's grace.[1]

This point is made in a powerful way by the very structure of the Heidelberg Catechism. It is one of the most beautiful catechetical texts in the history of the church and one which continues to be a confessional standard for Reformed churches of Dutch and German origin. Written in 1563 at the request of Frederick III, Elector Palatine, who resided in Heidelberg, both its content and its structure are didactically important and reflective of Protestant theology at its best.

The 129 questions of the catechism are divided into an introduction (questions 1–2) and then three major sections outlining the fallen human predicament (misery, questions 3–11), God's gracious action of salvation (grace, questions 12–85), and the human response of gratitude for that salvation (gratitude, questions 86–129). Zacharias Ursinus, the principal author of the catechism, structured the whole as a commentary on the Apostles' Creed, the sacraments, the Decalogue, and the Lord's Prayer. The latter two provided the content of gratitude. They outline the ways in which Christians are to respond to God's saving action. The Apostles' Creed and the sacrament sections, by contrast, provide the content of grace, explaining that which God himself does. As "I believe in the holy Catholic church" is a basic part of that creed, so it is placed in the "grace" section of the catechism, because the church is an act of God's grace.

The catechism offers this teaching on the church in question 54:

> Q. What do you believe concerning "the Holy Catholic Church"?
>
> A. That out of the whole human race, from the beginning to the end of the world, the Son of God, by His Spirit and Word, gathers, defends, and preserves for Himself unto everlasting life a chosen communion in the unity of the true faith; and that I am and forever shall remain a living member of this communion.[2]

What is noteworthy in this definition is the priority the catechism gives to the action of God in the creation and preservation of the church. God is the agent throughout. To use that inelegant modern parlance, if one asks who does church, the answer of the catechism is: God. He gathers, protects, and preserves her. The work of God in salvation is the work God does in creating the church and drawing

men and women into her. And in making this point, the catechism does no more than reflect the Bible's own teaching about the nature of the church.

The catechism also makes clear that the church has both a christological and a pneumatological significance. It is Christ, through his Spirit, who has always gathered, preserved, and protected the church. The church is thus a part of the work of Christ and part of the ongoing work of God here and now. The creation of the church is part of the economy of grace, one of God's redemptive actions, and her protection and preservation is much the same. As such, the church is the historical outworking of the Reformation understanding of grace as that grace is manifested in God's historical purposes for his people.

This should be very encouraging. If *we* "do" church, then church depends on our strength, and the fulfillment of the promise of, say, Matthew 16:18, depends on our strength. But such is not the case. God does it all, and therefore we can rest assured that his promises will be made good by the end of time.

In saying all of this, the catechism is scarcely unique. Rather, it offers an excellent and beautiful summary of what is in essence the Reformation Protestant position. For Luther, the fundamental definition of church is that body of people in whom Christ works through his Holy Spirit. In *On the Councils of the Church*, a later work written against the backdrop of Roman moves toward the summoning of a general council, Luther defined church this way:

> *Ecclesia* . . . should mean the holy Christian people, not only of the days of the apostles, who are long since dead, but to the end of the world, so that there is always a holy Christian people on earth, in whom Christ lives, works, and rules, *per redemptionem*, "through grace and the remission of sin," and the Holy Spirit, *per vivificationem et sanctificationem*, "through daily purging of sin and renewal of life," so that we do not remain in sin but are enabled and obliged to lead a new life, abounding in all kinds of good works, as the Ten Commandments or the two tables of Moses' law command, and not in old, evil works. That is St. Paul's teaching.[3]

The church has a real, visible, material existence, and it is the place where God works out his purposes both corporately and for individuals. It is where Christ is to be found, where he rules people, where he nurtures them, and where he brings them to spiritual maturity.

John Calvin has a similar view. In a famous passage at the start of book 4 of the *Institutes*, Calvin describes the church in the following way:

> I will begin with the Church, into whose bosom God is pleased to collect his children, not only that by her aid and ministry they may be nourished so long as they are babes and children, but may also be guided by her maternal care until they grow up to manhood, and, finally, attain to the perfection of faith. What God has thus joined, let not man put asunder (Mark 10:9): to those to whom he is a Father, the Church must also be a mother. This was true not merely under the Law, but even now after the advent of Christ; since Paul declares that we are the children of a new, even a heavenly Jerusalem (Gal. 4:26).[4]

The language of church as mother is powerful, particularly as Calvin parallels it to language about God as Father. He thereby makes the point that the individual is subordinate to, and dependent on, the church. No child can exist prior to, or independent of, its mother. Mothers feed, protect, nurture, and educate their children, and this is true with the church. His point is simple: there is a priority to the church as the gracious creation of God which provides the context for the nurture and growth of the Christian.

What is key for all of these Reformers is that the church has an objectivity to it in God's grace because God is the one who creates and sustains it; but there is also a historical, material aspect to this. Christians are not simply part of a mystical body in which they are able to exist in isolation from one another. The church as an act of God's grace has a historical, material manifestation. To say that the church must be mother to those to whom God is Father is a powerful claim which places connection to a church at the center of the practical Christian life. And in saying this, the Reformers are doing no more than drawing on the Bible's own teaching about the church as the creature of God's grace.

The Church as the Creature of God's Grace

Calvin's treatment of election makes it very clear that there is a historical, corporate dimension to the way in which God works out his electing purposes in history. God calls the head of a family, Abram, to be the father of many nations. He calls the Israelites to be his special covenant people. He constantly works out his gracious purposes by using such corporate bodies. This is not to say that salvation does not have a powerful individual component. Clearly it does. We believe in Christ as individuals, and his righteousness is imputed to us individually. But in our age of individualism and autonomy, we need to be reminded of the fact that God's promises are to his people (plural) and thus to his church (a body of people). Matthew 16:18 makes the key promise of ultimate victory not to me as an individual but to the church as the creation, object, and vessel of God's grace. I may perish before the Lord's return. My congregation and even my denomination may do the same. But the church will not, indeed, cannot, perish for she is the creation of God to which he has attached very specific and powerful promises. She will triumph at the end of time and be the beloved bride of Christ the groom, not because she is in herself powerful but because God has promised that he himself will make sure she arrives safely at the marriage feast of the Lamb.

This is deeply rooted in biblical theology. The New Testament consistently presents the church as the action of God in history and *not* as a human response to what God has done. The very language that New Testament writers use about the church speaks to precisely this point: the church is variously described as the new creation, as the temple, as the body of Christ, and as the bride of Christ. Each of these has an obvious christological foundation that further serves to underscore the sovereignty of God's gracious action.

The church as the new creation is highlighted by Paul in Colossians 1:15–20. Here, Paul parallels the work of Christ in the old creation with that in the new in a way that makes the church as an act of God's grace as clear as it could possibly be. The old creation was brought into being solely by the word of God's power. There was nothing, and then there was something. The difference was the action of God in creating, and this was obviously something in which no creature could have any part.

When Paul parallels this to the church, he is making a point: that the church is the result of God's

sovereign, unilateral, and powerful action.[5] She is a new creation. We may think that we "do" church, but ultimately the existence of the church is an act of which the only possible analogue is that of creation itself. That should be a very humbling matter to contemplate because to be part of the church is to be part of the new creation. This means that our churches are not ultimately the work of men and women; they are the work of God, called into being by his mighty and creative word. As amazing as the first creation was, so is God's work of the new creation in the church.

The New Testament makes it clear that the idea of the church as new creation has a christological aspect to it. It is founded in the work of Christ, which once again reminds us of its origins in the grace of God. In Colossians, Paul points toward Christ as the firstborn from the dead, the one whose resurrection is the foundation of the in-breaking of the new age. His rising from the grave was a miracle of God that marked the beginning of a new epoch.

This is a point worth pausing at and reflecting on. To be injured is one thing. One can go to a hospital; one can be healed from one's wounds. But to be dead is quite another. Lazarus festered in the tomb for days before the Lord came and called him to rise from the grave. He could not raise himself. He needed the power of God to lift him back to the land of the living. He was necessarily passive in the process. This gives us a taste of what resurrection is like. Christ's resurrection is, of course, the great paradigm of such and indeed the great power source for all others. He was dead, and the Father raised him back to life in a mighty, unilateral, and irresistible act of divine sovereignty. And that action, according to Paul, is the very foundation of the church's existence. It is only because Christ is risen that we have the church. Because he is risen, then we who are united to Christ by faith are risen too and will rise fully at the return of Christ.

How, then, does this understanding of the church connect to the Reformation cry of "grace alone"? We experience grace both as individuals and communally, and the church is the community of those who are spiritually resurrected in Christ and who even now await the final resurrection. Paul's language in Colossians is quite strong. In Colossians 2:12–13, Paul uses present-tense language to refer to believers as those who have died and already been resurrected. We know that he cannot be speaking here of the final resurrection, for elsewhere he criticizes those who claim that has already happened (2 Tim 2:18). What he is pointing to is that the Colossians are so identified by faith with Christ that there is a sense in which they have already died and been resurrected. Even now, their identity and their existence is determined absolutely by an act of God's complete sovereignty and grace. They are who they are simply because God has graciously acted on their behalf in Christ and united them to him. Only by "grace alone" are we saved as individuals and as the church.

This sovereign, gracious priority of God for the church is also underscored by the way the New Testament uses temple language. This is an extremely rich vein of biblical teaching that ties together the Bible, from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22, showing a setting for the temple that is entirely the work of God.[6] The Jerusalem temple is designed by God and indwelt by him. It is the place where he chooses to meet with his people. Were it not for his specifications and his actions, there would be no temple. It is the same with the church. The church is designed and built by God, indwelt by his Holy Spirit. That is what makes her the church and not just one more association of human beings gathered together for some mutually agreed purpose.

Thus, for example, in 2 Corinthians 6:16 ("What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God") the identification of the New Testament church

with the temple is made explicit as Paul presents the church as the fulfillment of God's gracious promises to his people. The church is not our human response to grace but is itself an act of God's grace. Earlier in that same chapter, Paul had presented himself as bringing the message of God's grace by setting his ministry in the context of Isaianic prophecy. Again, this also potentially points back to creation language, if the argument of G. K. Beale, that the garden of Eden is itself intended as a temple, is correct. The church is part of God's sovereign plan of salvation and represents the restoration of that intimate relationship that existed between God and humanity in Eden. Certainly it also points forward to the final consummation in the book of Revelation. The sovereign, free, and gracious action of God is the basis for the new temple and thus for the church's very existence. God builds the temple, not us.

This also connects very closely to the New Testament notion of the church as the body of Christ. In John 2:19–21, Jesus himself identifies his body with the temple. This language is expanded by Paul to include the church (e.g., 2 Cor 6:14–18), and thus the church is to be understood in the context of God's fulfillment of prophecy, an act of God, not some kind of human response, as, for example, Peter's speech in Acts 2:14–40 and its aftermath make clear.

The language of the church as the body of Christ, like that of new creation and temple, is remarkably rich and biblically suggestive. Among other things, it carries clear connotations of God's sovereign grace. Christ himself took flesh from the Virgin as the result of the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit. The flesh, like Mary herself, was passive in the process, and the whole action was itself rooted in God's gracious plan of salvation and executed by the Spirit. Thus, to refer to the church as the body of Christ also highlights the sovereignty of God in the action of constituting the church. The church is created by the Spirit and is where God freely chooses to enjoy intimate communion with his people via the same Spirit uniting people to Christ. It is where Christ rules, and where human beings are to live not as they choose but as they are called. The church is not a voluntary association, a social club that we can join and leave on a whim. It is a divine creation, and those who belong to it are called by God to be part of such.

So what does this mean for us today? The first practical point we should note is this: when we gather as a church, a biblical understanding of God's grace means that *we are only there because God has acted.* Indeed, our gathering as the church is the action of God and not of ourselves. If we can ever legitimately make ourselves the subject of a sentence containing the phrase "do church," it is only in a very subordinate and derivative way. The church that takes God's grace seriously believes that the church is solely God's creature—not our response to his grace.

The Church as Bride

While the New Testament describes the church as the new creation, the temple, and the body of Christ, it also calls her the bride of Christ. The language of bride underlines the grace of God toward the church in several important ways.

First, we need to understand the analogy not in terms of modern marriage but in terms of a biblical understanding of God's love. In most modern marriages, mutual attraction lies at the foundation of love and the marital bond. I chose to marry my wife because I saw something beautiful in her. Presumably she chose me for similar reasons! As we noted in theologians such as Aquinas and Luther, they understood divine love as belonging to a different order. Divine love precedes any

intrinsically attractive quality in the object of love, and this reflects the biblical teaching on the Lord and his bride. Indeed, the marriage analogy is not used in the Bible to highlight what God finds desirable or worthy in people, but rather to bring God's grace into dramatic relief.

We see this in the consistent portrayal of God's people as a *faithless* bride. Ezekiel 16 is the key biblical passage on this, describing how the Lord dealt mercifully with his people. He chose them when they were at bay and continued to lavish mercy on them even after they became his bride and still played the whore. A similar drama is played out in the life of the prophet Hosea, who is commanded by God to marry a prostitute and then to take her back after her infidelity. When the church is described as the bride of Christ, the point is not that the Lord has made her his bride because she is beautiful and delightful. It is because she was not so—and despite her ugliness and filth he has chosen to make her so. Bridal language in describing the relationship between God and his people is saturated with God's grace.

Paul uses the bride analogy in a related but different way, to emphasize the sacrifice of Christ. Addressing husbands in Ephesians 5, he points out that a husband's love for his wife is to be sacrificial precisely because his relationship to his bride is analogous to that of Christ to his church. This ties the church to the economy of grace. Grace is not simply God overlooking our sin; rather, it is God being motivated by love and mercy to give himself for the church, his bride. The bride is only the bride because God has acted to make her so by his sacrificial self-giving.

The bride analogy also ties the church into the historical unfolding of the economy of grace. The church is currently betrothed as bride to Christ, as Paul makes clear in 2 Corinthians 11:2, and this is a significant point. Modern marriage practice in the West has no precise equivalent to betrothal. While engagement comes closest (being the point where the intention to marry is made public), betrothal in ancient cultures was more significant. It was not only the public declaration of an intention to marry; it also carried with it a high level of exclusive, formal commitment such that it was virtually marriage, albeit prior to the formal consummation. Final consummation will come at the marriage feast of the Lamb, as described at the end of Revelation. To call the church "the bride of Christ" is to do justice both to her special, exclusive status as the creation and object of God's grace here and now, and also to point to God's coming fulfillment of his gracious promises to her at the end of time.

Christ as the Head of the Church

Christ's resurrection means that the church is the creation of God's grace, and his choice of her as his bride points to his electing love. But there is more to Christ's relationship to the church than simply its origin. As the embodiment of God's grace, Christ is also the source of ongoing life for the church. There is a vital, ongoing connection between the resurrected Christ and the daily life of the church here on earth.

In his commentary addressing Colossians 2:19, Calvin picks up on Paul's language of headship, and he makes the point that the head gives life and order to the body as a whole. In other words, the church is dependent on the grace of God for its existence. Indeed, it is continually constituted by the gracious act of God in Christ.[7] The direction of action is always from God in Christ to those who are united to him by faith. Just as my head is the control center for my body, from its basic vital functions to the way it moves and what it says, so Christ is head of the church. We as Christians draw our

spiritual life from him, and we do that as we are part of his church, where his life-giving Spirit dwells and where the words of his life-giving gospel are proclaimed. We do not live in independence from our head, but in complete dependence on it.

This christological point about headship also serves to set the issue of church governance within the context of God's grace. In Colossians 1:18 Paul describes Christ as head over the church. Headship carries with it not just connotations of life source but also of rule and governance. The head of a department runs the department. My head controls me. And Calvin sees Paul's language of headship here as referring to the governance of the church as well. This demands that we look at the practical dimensions of church life in a christological context and that we see them as also being the result of grace.[8]

Because Christ governs the church as its head, it is necessary for the church to acknowledge that headship in the purposes she pursues and the manner in which she pursues them. Practically, this means that her purposes are not for her to decide. They are to be those that Christ sets forth and must be carried out in the manner in which he has decided. It may sound odd to us that even this is an act of God's grace. We tend to think of grace as the unmerited favor of God in the face of our sin and rebellion, and so it is. But part of God's response to the problem created by our sinfulness is his creation of the church, with her mission, her structures, and all of her means for accomplishing God's purposes.

Were the church merely a human response to God's grace, presumably there would be considerable flexibility in how these purposes could be understood and how the church's response to Christ should be articulated. But as we pointed out earlier, the church is God's response to human sin, not our response to God. Calvin sees Paul making the point that Christ is head of the church relative to her government. In this he means that she is God's creation, not the invention of people, and is thus to be organized according to God's specifications. As the Westminster Confession states, Christ's headship means that no mere human being can claim to be head of the church, whether mortal king or the pope.[9] That also means that no human being decides what the church is or does. Her head, Christ, does that. In other words, her purpose is determined by God's grace.

In all of this, we are simply working out the practical implication that all of salvation is by grace alone. In all that we do, we are responding to a prior work of God. And this has very practical aspects to it. In the next three chapters we will address the means of grace, those things that God has appointed to be the instruments of his gracious actions in the present. But there is more to the church as an act of grace than just the question of her tools and purpose. One of the most egregious temptations that the language of "doing church" evokes is that of becoming pragmatic about church governance. If church is something we do, rather than something that God does, then we have the right to decide how best to organize it to achieve the best results. But if church is something that God does and Christ rules, then we must pay attention to the way in which that rule is to be exercised. "Church" in the New Testament is not simply a term used for the sum total of all believers. It refers to the organized gatherings of those who meet in Christ's name.

We live in an age that is marked by suspicion of institutions, at least traditional institutions, with their established hierarchies and structures of authority. We have a deep distrust of those in power and a strong democratic urge to see those in authority as potential bullies or corrupt abusers of power. When we add to this mix the Protestant rhetoric on the priesthood of all believers, the stage is set for

us to bristle at any notion that the church should have an authoritative structure, let alone that this structure should be one worthy of respect and possessing authority. Yet one of the implications of our salvation by grace alone is the recognition that the church is an act of God's grace. God specifies in his word the way in which the church is to be governed, and church government is thus part of God's gracious provision to human beings to bring them home to glory.

In 1 Timothy and Titus, Paul calls for the appointment of elders and deacons. Again, in our evangelical contexts today the appointment of church leaders is probably not something that comes to mind when we think about God's grace. But a moment's reflection suggests that this is an oversight. The church is the context in which Christians are discipled and grow in their faith. And in the next three chapters we will look at the means of grace—the word, sacraments, and prayer, which are all tasks of the church. So it makes sense that if the church is to be the place where God's people grow in grace, God himself should determine how the rule of Christ is to be exercised on earth.

As Paul makes clear, the church is to be governed by elders. These are to be people who exhibit real spiritual integrity in their lives, who understand the gospel and are able to teach it to others. They are to embody in their own personal behavior those qualities to which all Christians are to aspire. They teach by precept but also, by implication, by example. They are to rule in the church and thus exercise care over the souls of those placed under their charge. Mindful of the fact that Christ alone is head of the church, their rule is to be what we might call a ministerial one. They cannot be despotic but should only exercise power to the extent that the word of God allows them. That is part of what it means to be an institution of grace: God's word, not human decisions, carries ultimate authority.

This is why Paul adds another strand to the constitution of the church here on earth: he tells Timothy to hold fast to a form of sound teaching (2 Tim 1:13). The church is to have a doctrinal confession that sets forth the teaching of Scripture in a succinct form. Her message is to be regulated by God's revelation rather than by the whims of those who claim to belong to her. Individual churches should not decide the message preached and taught based on a congregational vote or the doctrinal tastes and preferences of the eldership. Nor should pastors choose the topics or the texts on which they preach based on what they think will be most amusing to the congregants. The church's testimony is not a function of what the consumer wants. No. The church's testimony is given to her by God in the words of his Scripture.

We all know that no Christian simply believes the Bible. If asked what he believes, no Christian just starts reading out loud at Genesis 1 and ends at Revelation 22. In fact, every Christian believes the Bible means something, and that that something can be expressed using a form of sound words, a summary statement of vital biblical doctrine. Combined with a properly constituted eldership, this is part of good biblical polity and part of the economy of grace.

Both of these aspects of the church—elders and doctrinal confession—are counter to so much of modern culture and so much of modern church life. And yet if we take seriously the church as the creature of God's grace and the vessel wherein that grace is made available, through word and sacrament, to believers, then we need to take seriously the Bible's own teaching about the way the church should be constituted and governed.

Conclusion

As we recognize that the church is the creation of God's grace in Christ and not our response to

God's grace, then we are able to think more clearly about what the church should look like. If the church is a component part of God's plan of grace, then we need to structure it according to God's design (forms of sound words, elders, deacons). This also points us to the tools the church must use for the accomplishment of her mission. While the Reformers had some debate over how many marks of the true church there were (Luther had seven, Calvin just two), there was basic agreement over which two were essential: the proclamation of the word and the administration of the sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper. It is to these means of grace that we now turn.

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1. The Reformers spent a considerable amount of time on the matter of the church. In part this was because they needed to justify their institutional break with the Roman Church and thus faced the obvious polemical challenge from their opponents, "How can you claim to be the true church when we have institutional continuity on our side?" But they also understood that the New Testament placed a high premium on the church as a body of believers who were committed to one another and subject to the leadership of elders/overseers. They knew that God's purposes were to be worked out through such a body using the tools he had designated for the task: the preaching of the word, baptism, and the Lord's Supper.

2. Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 2:781.

3. *LW* 41:144.

4. *Institutes* 4.1.1 (Beveridge).

5. Cf. 2 Cor 4:6, where Paul makes a clear parallel between God's action in creation and his action in the calling of sinners into his kingdom.

6. See G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004).

7. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, trans. John Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1851), 198.

8. "Here . . . in my opinion, he speaks chiefly of government. He shews, therefore, that it is Christ that alone has authority to govern the Church, that it is he to whom alone believers ought to have an eye, and on whom alone the unity of the body depends" (ibid., 152).

9. *WCF* 25.6.

CHAPTER 8
The Word

> For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.
>
> *1 Thessalonians 1:4–5, ESV*

We began the last chapter by reflecting on how grace cannot be discussed in an abstract manner because it is not simply an objective truth but something which affects our whole being. That is why this second half of the book is devoted to what we might call the practical means by which grace becomes a reality in our lives. And if the church, God's new creation, is the context in which this takes place, then it is the word, the proclamation of God's word, which is the primary means by which God's grace confronts us.

The differences between the medieval Catholic Church and the churches of the Reformation are nowhere more obviously apparent than in the architecture of their respective places of worship. To enter one of the great cathedrals of the high Middle Ages, such as that of Cologne, is to enter a space that is focused on and saturated in the sacraments, specifically the Mass. As one enters the building, one's eyes are drawn to the high altar, because the architect knew his theology. He knew that the most important thing that happened in the liturgy was the celebration of the Mass, where Christ literally came down to meet his people in grace. As the bread and wine became the body and blood of the Lord Jesus, Christ was present with his people. Heaven met earth, and all eyes should thus be focused on the place where this mystery took place.

Enter a Protestant cathedral, say, St. Giles's in Edinburgh, and one enters a very different world. Not only are the usual elaborate aesthetics of medieval piety missing, but one's eyes are drawn not to any altar but rather to the elevated pulpit. Again, the architect knew his theology well, for the most important thing that happens in a Protestant service is the reading and especially (to use the adverb employed in the Shorter Catechism) the preaching of God's word. God's presence is mediated not under the accidents of bread and wine at the altar. It is not the eyes and the tongue that apprehend God. It is the ears. God comes to his people through the declaration of his word by the mouths of his preachers. Indeed, as the Second Helvetic Confession so dramatically expresses it in the very first chapter: "We believe that today, when this word of God is proclaimed in the Church by preachers who have been legitimately called, then the very word of God itself is proclaimed and received by

the faithful."[1]

The language is emphatic: *the very word of God itself*. When the preacher preaches faithfully, the congregation actually hears God's word. We might put this another way: when the preacher preaches faithfully, it is really God who speaks to the congregation.

Of course, Heinrich Bullinger, the confession's author, did not believe that his sermons were so to be seen as the word of God to the extent that they should be inserted into the canon of inspired Scripture. The point he was making was this: when God's word is correctly parsed and proclaimed, God speaks to his people through the words of the preacher in an authoritative and powerful way. In so doing, Bullinger stands as representative of the Protestant Reformation tradition: the word of God, not the sacraments, is the primary means of God dealing graciously with his people. God addresses his people through the word proclaimed. Even the sacraments only gain their significance from being attached to the word, a point that was also architecturally reinforced in Reformed churches by having the communion table placed symbolically in front of, and beneath, the pulpit.

Understanding this point is crucial. Protestantism is not simply a set of theological doctrines. Those doctrines stand in direct relation to practice. If the Reformation understanding of grace is taken seriously, then the reading and especially the preaching of the word of God will stand at the center of Protestant practice. Preaching the word is a means of grace; in fact, it is the primary means of grace. It is the means God has appointed for bringing his gracious purpose to fruition in the lives of the men and women who make up the church. God acts first and foremost in the proclamation from the pulpit of his mighty saving acts.

This means that preachers need to understand that they perform a theological action that demands care and earnestness. They handle the word of God and bring the most important message of all to people's ears. Their carefulness also rests on confidence because the power of the message does not reside ultimately in them as messengers but in the God who speaks through the message. Nothing kills churches faster than preachers who do not understand both elements of the task. Preachers need to understand God's grace, not simply so that they can preach its content but also so that they can preach, period.

A Theology of God's Speech

As we saw in the first part, at the heart of the Reformers'—indeed, of all anti-Pelagian—understandings of grace is the idea that grace is something which ultimately comes from without. For the Reformers, as indeed for Paul, this grace breaks into the lives of individuals primarily through the word proclaimed. The gospel is not an experience; it is the declaration of the identity of Jesus Christ, with all that entails for the identity of human beings made in his image. Yet in order to understand the Reformers' position, we need to understand something of the biblical teaching on speech, specifically God's speech. This provides the foundation for the Protestant understanding of how the word proclaimed can be powerful unto salvation.

The Reformers took their cue on the word of God from the biblical description of how God acts. One of the very first things the Bible reveals about him, beyond the fact of his mere existence, is that he is one who acts primarily through speech. This is how the creation is brought about in Genesis 1. God speaks; he uses words. There was nothing, God spoke, and then there was something, that which God had spoken into existence.

Now, presumably speech is not predicated of God and humans in a univocal manner: God's speech did not involve the use of vocal chords, for example, and until matter was created there could have been none of the vibrations we associate with physical sound. Yet by implication the Bible makes it clear that the closest analogy to God's creative act is the human act of speech.

One of the great insights of Protestantism is that this concept, central to how we are to understand God and the world he created, also has implications for God's ongoing presence in and interaction with the world. We should note that this creative power of God's speech correlates with what we saw earlier in Luther's understanding of the cross and of justification. Justification by grace through faith depends on the power of God's declaration to make a thing to be that which it intrinsically was not. God's speech determines reality. It creates reality. The person who is actually sinful is declared by God to be righteous because he is clothed in the imputed, extrinsic righteousness of Christ. He is not righteous in any way that the world would recognize as being "real." But he is really righteous simply because God has said that he is such. This finds its parallel in the work of the cross. Christ hangs on the cross, apparently a crushed, defeated sinner, yet in reality the holy, triumphant Lamb of God. To the world, the cross is obviously a crushing defeat of the one who hangs there. But God declares that it is the opposite, a spectacular and decisive triumph over evil. No empirical observation can lead to this conclusion; only the revelation of the truth via the word of God can do so. Only faith grasping that word can acknowledge the truth. And thus that word grasped by faith makes the cross the power of God to salvation.

Creation is described in Genesis 1 as a series of verbal actions by God. "And God said …" is the repeated refrain that punctuates the account and brings into existence various parts of the created realm. So God's word is not simply a descriptive thing. It is a powerful, creative thing. Psalm 33:6 summarizes this well: "By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth."

This transcendent, creative power of words lies at the heart of Luther's understanding of the nature of language, as he makes clear in a famous passage in his *Lectures on Genesis*:

> Who could conceive of the possibility of bringing forth from the water a being which clearly could not continue to exist in water? But God speaks a mere word, and immediately the birds are brought forth from the water. If the word is spoken, all things are possible, so that out of the water are made either fish or birds. Therefore any bird whatever and any fish whatever are nothing but nouns in the divine rule of language; through this rule of language those things that are impossible become very easy, while those that are clearly opposite become very much alike, and vice versa.[2]

Luther's phrase describing creatures as "nothing but nouns in the divine rule of language" is fascinating, drawing out the clear implications of Luther's linguistic philosophy: words constitute reality. It is God's speech that makes the sea produce birds, a natural impossibility. This is reflective of the late medieval nominalism that we noted earlier and even bears some similarities to certain aspects of today's postmodern literary theory, which emphasizes the constructive nature of words. To an extent we can all sense the creative power of language: the use of a racial epithet is regarded as offensive because it does something to the people to whom it is applied. It denigrates them and thus

transforms reality for them in a negative way. Language is creative, and we instinctively know this, as demonstrated by the heated debates over freedom of speech and political correctness.

Yet Luther's understanding of language here is not that of today's radical postmodernism. It differs in at least one very important way. For Luther, language is creative because it is spoken by God, and he uses this speech as that which determines what exactly reality is. God is in himself unknowable, and prior to his speaking human beings cannot put a limit on what he may or may not do. But when God speaks, his power uses that speech to bring things into being and to constitute reality. That reality has a stability and a certainty to it precisely because it is the speech of the sovereign and omnipotent God, who rules over all things.

By contrast, I might scream and shout at the ocean all day long, commanding it to give forth fish and birds, but it will not happen because I am a mere creature and not Creator. It is because it is God who speaks, the God who controls all things, that his language is creative. This is a crucial point to understand when we consider the relationship between God speaking in his word and the preacher speaking God's word to the congregation.

There is another aspect to God's speech that is important. As God's speech creates and determines reality, so the scheme of the devil is to create an alternative linguistic world that possesses a compelling appearance of reality but is ultimately false. Here is how Luther describes the temptation in the garden:

> Moses expresses himself very carefully and says: "The serpent said," that is, with a word it attacks the Word. The Word which the Lord had spoken to Adam was: "Do not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." For Adam this Word was Gospel and Law; it was his worship; it was his service and the obedience he could offer God in this state of innocence. These Satan attacks and tries to destroy. Nor is it only his intention, as those who lack knowledge think, to point out the tree and issue an invitation to pick its fruit. He points it out indeed; but then he adds another and a new statement, as he still does in the church.[3]

This point will be critical in understanding what preaching is and why it is important. The serpent is challenging God's word by presenting another, alternative word. Calvin puts it this way: "He wished to inject into the woman a doubt which might induce her to believe *that* not to be the word of God, for which a plausible reason did not manifestly appear."[4] The serpent's game is a linguistic one: undermining how God had specified reality to be by hinting at an alternative account. The struggle between God and Satan, then, begins as a struggle over speech.

The early chapters of Genesis also point to another significant theological fact about speech: one of the things that connects God to human beings and to no other creature on earth is the ability to talk, to communicate and to do things with words. Indeed, speech, particularly as it connotes rule and sovereignty, is part of the image of God in which human beings are made. No other creature is given the power of speech, and no other creature is given the mandate that comes with that power. Thus, God creates by the word of his power and names Adam. This naming of Adam is the sign of his authority over the man. He then gives to Adam authority over all other creatures, a point made clear by his responsibility to name them. Genesis 2:19–20 says the Lord brought the creatures to Adam that

he might name them; and whatever name he gave to each creature, that was its name. Adam is thus responsible for bringing a certain element of order to the creation that God has made. We might thus say that Adam's speech too is "creative" in a subordinate manner to that of God himself. Human words carry power and can be used to order and thus (within creaturely limits) to change reality.

This creative power of speech is not restricted to the early chapters of Genesis. Throughout the Old Testament, God's speech continues to be the primary mode of his action and to reshape reality or to bring new things into being. He calls Abraham and gives him a covenant promise. He calls to Moses from the burning bush. He speaks again to Moses on Sinai and gives him the law. Significantly, Heinrich Bullinger refers to this as "preaching." "In the mount Sina [*sic*] the Lord himself preached to the great congregation of Israel, rehearsing so plainly, that they might understand those ten commandments, wherein is contained every point of godliness."[5]

By using this language of *preaching*, Bullinger points toward a clear analogy that he sees between the act of God in addressing his people and that which God's servants do when they speak God's words to his people. God does things through his word. He creates, he commands, he promises. And he does things through his word proclaimed by his servants. God in the Bible also speaks through various prophets, giving them detailed words to say to his people or foreign nations, or using their words to accomplish his own purposes.[6] Biblical examples include the words of Jonah that bring Nineveh to repentance, of Samuel as he first raises Saul up as king and then tears the kingdom from him and passes it to David, and of Nathan as he convicts David of his sin with Bathsheba. In each case, God's words do these things. They are the means by which he accomplishes his purpose.

This is very important for understanding the connection between grace and preaching in the Reformation church: New Testament and then postapostolic preachers are the successors of the Old Testament prophets as they bring God's word to bear on God's people and on the world around us. The message they proclaim is the means God uses to accomplish his purposes. Its power is thus rooted in divine action, not in the eloquence of the preacher.

We might also add here that this points to the importance of *hearing* the word. The word proclaimed comes from outside us and shows us what the world is really like. Too often reality seems to be what we want it to be. Our hearts are deceptive and willing to accept the world's own propaganda about itself at face value. The word of God tears down such propaganda and forces us to face reality as it really is. Every age, of course, has its own pathologies and its own particular ways of articulating its rebellion again God. In our day, we might think of society's obsession with entertainment. What is this but an attempt to persuade us that the meaning of life is found in our momentary pleasures? The word of God preached repudiates that and demands that we face up to reality as God's word determines it—that we are his creatures and accountable to him.

One obvious implication of this is that divine speech is not simply, or perhaps even primarily, a matter of communicating information. It is the typical mode of his presence and power. Speech is how God is present or, to use a more modern idiom, how he makes his presence felt. God's speech created the universe, and it also created the people of God. God called Abram and made him the father of all nations. To meet God is to be addressed by him or by his chosen speakers. The Jews were special because God spoke to them in a special way, by means of his covenant promises. His rule was exercised by and through his word. The Jews were those who had God's law and his promises. These were the means by which God was gracious to them.

This presence of God by speech is not restricted to the Jews. When God addressed the gentiles, he was present to them also, whether in general matters, such as the judgment against Babylon, or in mercy, as in the particular case of Naaman. His sovereignty over them was also exercised in and through his word. When God ceased to speak, it was a sign that he had withdrawn his favor from his people. Thus Amos predicts a famine of the word of God that will cause the people to wander over the face of the earth seeking God but doing so in vain. A silent God was an absent God.

When we move to the New Testament, the power of the speech of God continues to be emphasized. At Jesus's baptism, the Father publicly recognizes his Son by speech, as the Holy Spirit descends on him in the form of a dove. The point is clear: God in Christ is now present with his people, a presence signified by the word. The economy of grace that is manifested in Christ is inaugurated by a verbal declaration. Then, when Christ is confronted with the devil's temptations in the wilderness, his weapon of choice is the word of God. The word is the means by which Christ is upheld. As the devil does what he did in the garden, that is, pervert God's words, so Christ aptly applies God's word and puts his enemy to flight. Then there are the many examples throughout the Gospels of Christ's speech casting out demons, healing the sick, and even raising the dead. Not all his acts of power are linguistic (for example, the healing of the woman with the flow of blood), but most are. The word was the means by which Christ demonstrated his sovereignty and brought grace to bear in the lives of individuals.

This word-oriented means of God's presence and power continued into the postascension apostolic church. Preaching is central to the narrative of the book of Acts and lies at the heart of the practical realization of God's gracious purposes in Paul's New Testament letters. It was by means of verbal declaration that the Reformers saw the apostles expanding the kingdom. The prophetic word was a word that tore down illusions and built up realities. Thus, the preacher stood at the very center of the spiritual struggle of the present age, both for judgment and for grace.

The Word Preached and the Grace of God

It is not surprising that the Reformers saw themselves standing in continuity with this biblical emphasis on God's word as his means of action, both for judgment and for grace. In the Reformation, preaching was power, and the preaching office was the most significant one within the church. All of the major Reformers were preachers, with the pulpit being the center of their professional lives. Their various reformations were all centered on and driven by the proclamation of the word.

There were obvious cultural aspects to this: in an age of low literacy, the preacher was often the person through whom many people obtained their understanding of the surrounding world. Thus, Luther's sermons often ended with an appendix, not connected to the main exposition, which offered commentary on some aspect of current affairs.[7] This political significance of preaching helps to explain the constant attempts in England to regulate the practice in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and even to suppress it entirely at points in the 1630s.

Yet the cultural power of preaching is clearly only a small part of the story and not one that would have interested the Reformers to any significant degree. For them, the biblical theology of the word, which we have noted above, was the driving factor. God preached, and so his servants must preach. Preachers had power because their words connected in some way to the word and were thus the means of God accomplishing his purposes in this world. Indeed, Reformation preachers saw

themselves as the successors in some ways of the great prophets of Scripture. This is reflected often in the language they applied to the preaching task. The gatherings of ministers in Reformation Zurich and later in London, where they would hear each other proclaim the word and offer critique and encouragement, were known as "prophesyings." William Perkins's classic text on how to preach is titled *The Arte of Prophesying*. The preacher was not merely a lecturer or teacher. His task was not simply descriptive. His task was no less than prophetic: in proclaiming the word of God, he was to tear down human inventions and illusions about the world and to build in their place reality as God had declared it to be through the word of his power. As the Second Helvetic Confession declares, the word of God preached is the word of God.

A good example of such confidence in the word is provided by Luther in 1522. This was the moment when he returned to Wittenberg from his time at the Wartburg castle in order to bring order back to a town whose reformation had fallen under the sway of radical iconoclasts and was quickly descending into chaos. Under pressure from the authorities to restore order, Luther did the one thing he knew would have power to transform the situation. He preached. And during this series of sermons, he made one of his most famous comments about the word of God:

> I will preach it, teach it, write it, but I will constrain no man by force, for faith must come freely without compulsion. Take myself as an example. I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept [cf. Mark 4:26–29], or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything.[8]

The rhetoric is typical of Luther's exuberance, yet the content reflects his theology: the Reformation was above all a movement of the proclaimed word because that was how God achieved his gracious purposes. As long as Luther preached that word, he could be confident that God would use it to tear down human pride and bring sinners by grace to Christ. After all, the gospel is the message of what Christ has done, and the primary means by which this message is shared is preaching. As a result, it should not be a surprise that God uses preaching more than any other means in order to communicate his grace to people. In the word proclaimed we hear about—and are confronted by—the truth of Christ.

Preaching and the Word Written

The question of authority—never far from the surface in the Reformation—now becomes acute. If preaching is God's primary means of accomplishing his purposes, what are the authoritative norms for postapostolic preaching? We have noted a number of times how the Reformation's fundamental critique of the medieval church's sacramentally centered view of grace meant that it was also a basic critique of medieval understandings of church and authority. Given this, the question of the content of this preaching comes to the fore. If the word is the primary means of grace, is preaching the word simply a spontaneous or ecstatic thing prompted by the Holy Spirit, or is it regulated and normed in some way?

The first thing to note in answering this is that the practical content of preaching is shaped both by how we understand grace—God's freely bestowed favor—and justification—God's righteousness given to the believer via the instrumentality of faith in God's promise. That salvation has a promissory content demands that preaching must have a promissory content too. A promise, any promise, requires content: a thing promised and one who promises. It also assumes certain things, such as the promiser's basic integrity—that he is able to deliver, desires to deliver, and will deliver on the promise.

Preaching must highlight the promise and the character of the God who makes the promise. That means talking about human sin and the gracious, divine response that is embodied in Christ. To preach is to preach Christ, and Christ is no empty word into which any meaning can be attributed. This points the preacher back to Scripture as the norming authority of all statements made in sermons. For a sermon to be true preaching, it must express the teaching of the Bible. Then it comes with divine power.

While Luther was not the greatest exegete of the Reformation, his theology of justification by grace through faith set the basic criteria for Reformation preaching. The antithesis of law and gospel as destroying self-righteousness and creating faith in Christ was foundational to the Christian life and foundational to the content of preaching. As his catechisms and his liturgies move from law to gospel, so the preacher was to move in his sermons. The pattern of the economy of grace was to be reflected, indeed, enacted, in the preaching that came from the pulpit. Each sermon was to be a microcosm of the human condition and the divine, gracious response. The preacher must first declare the law and then declare the promise in Christ.[9] Both law and gospel must be taught or else problems ensue, either despair or presumption.[10]

This understanding of preaching as regulated by Scripture was another point of contact between the Reformers' understanding of postapostolic ministry and that of the Old Testament prophets, who were, indeed, the precedential model for the postapostolic preacher. Calvin himself describes Moses and the Old Testament prophets in terms that might equally apply to contemporary preachers:

> The law was promulgated, and prophets were afterwards added to be its interpreters. For though the uses of the law were manifold, … the special office assigned to Moses and all the prophets was to teach the method of reconciliation between God and man.[11]

Calvin's use of the phrase "method of reconciliation" resonates with Paul's characterization of his own apostolic ministry (and, by implication, that of those who follow in his footsteps) in 2 Corinthians 6. Postapostolic preaching is to be like the preaching of biblical times: an exposition of God's revealed truth. Of course, the words of the preachers recorded in the Bible possess a peculiar authority by virtue of their canonical status. But the principle of a sound sermon—the exegesis and application of divine revelation—remains the same for postapostolic preachers.

Bullinger expresses the matter thus:

> But we read, that the Lord hath used this ordinary means even from the first creation of all things. Whom he meaneth to bestow knowledge and faith on to them he sendeth teachers, by the word of God to preach true faith unto them. Not because it lieth in man's

> power, will, or ministry, to give faith; nor because the outward word spoken by man's mouth is able of itself to bring faith: but the voice of man, and the preaching of God's word, do teach us what true faith is, or what God doth will and command us to believe. For God himself alone, by sending his Holy Spirit into the hearts and minds of men, doth open our hearts, persuade our minds, and cause us with all our heart to believe that which we by his word and teaching have learned to believe. The Lord could by miracle from heaven, without any preaching at all, have bestowed faith in Christ upon Cornelius the Centurion at Cesaria: but yet by an angel he doth send him to the preaching of Peter; and while Peter preacheth, God by his Holy Spirit worketh in the heart of Cornelius, causing him to believe his preaching.[12]

Here Bullinger makes it clear that faith is the product of preaching. This is not simply in the sense that preaching sets forth the promise that the human mind can then grasp and trust. Rather, the preaching itself is an instrument used by the Holy Spirit as the means for creating this faith or, we might perhaps add in the case of, say, Pharaoh, the hardening of the heart.

Indeed, in *Bondage of the Will*, the case of Pharaoh's hardening is one of the biblical passages to which Luther had to respond at some length because of the use made by it of Erasmus in his *Diatribe*. Luther's resolution of the problem of the shift in narrative from Pharaoh hardening his own heart to it being hardened by God focuses on the role of the proclaimed word. Pharaoh is, like all unregenerate people, in bondage to sin. When God's word comes from outside, and the Lord chooses not to have the Spirit use that word to liberate him, he grows harder and more implacable in his wickedness. This is because God's word is not simply a collection of facts. It makes moral demands on people. It condemns their unrighteousness and points them toward the all-sufficiency of Christ, whose grace in itself is also a reminder of human insufficiency. Thus, Pharaoh is both hardened by the Lord via the word, and he chooses to harden himself by not responding in faith to that which is presented to him.[13]

Behind this, of course, stands the fact that grace rests on the divine decree of predestination. Preaching the word thus becomes the means by which election is realized and revealed in time. This is the point Calvin makes in book 3 of the *Institutes* when he reflects on why the preaching of the gospel does not seem to have the same saving power among all those who hear it:

> The covenant of life is not preached equally to all, and among those to whom it is preached, does not always meet with the same reception. This diversity displays the unsearchable depth of the divine judgment, and is without doubt subordinate to God's purpose of eternal election.[14]

In other words, preaching is not simply a question of describing something; preaching is powerful. The word of God is creative. It creates reality. And when it comes to the matter of salvation, it is God's means of bringing into reality his gracious purposes for his people. It is itself a spiritually constructive exercise that confronts the individual and is used by God to transform them through the Holy Spirit or to harden them in sin. One cannot hear the word of God and be left indifferent to it, for the word of God is the means by which God works out his purposes, both of grace and of judgment. As God's word was God's instrument for creation by the Spirit in the beginning, so

his word remains his instrument for re-creation by the Spirit in the ongoing extension of his kingdom.

Word and Spirit

This connection between word and Spirit is crucial in the Reformation for dividing magisterial Protestantism from more radical movements. Indeed, early on in the Reformation, more radical voices than those of Luther or even Zwingli emerged that posed a challenge not simply to traditional Catholicism, but also to the magisterial Reformers themselves. During Luther's absence in 1521–22, while he sojourned at the Wartburg castle, the Wittenberg leadership welcomed the arrival of the so-called Zwickau prophets to town. These three men were representative of a theological tendency that continued throughout the Reformation and indeed finds counterparts in the church today. They offered a radical separation of Spirit from word, at least from the written word in Scripture, claiming to be led directly by the Spirit in a way detached from and therefore not regulated by the word. The result was, unsurprisingly, chaos. This type of separation cedes church leadership to the most charismatic and forceful personalities who convey the conviction that their plans are those of God himself.

For Luther, an example of this occurred in 1521–22 with his former friend and cobelligerent in the Reformation, Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt. Karlstadt claimed to be led by the Spirit *beyond* the word to a more dynamic and, in practice, socially and politically radical version of the Reformation. Karlstadt had once stood shoulder to shoulder with Luther, but by this time he had come under the influence of others. Here is Luther's denunciation of his former colleague's theology:

> But should you ask how one gains access to this same lofty spirit they do not refer you to the outward gospel but to some imaginary realm, saying: Remain in "self abstraction" where I now am and you will have the same experience. A heavenly voice will come, and God himself will speak to you. If you inquire further as to the nature of this "self abstraction," you will find that they know as much about it as Dr. Karlstadt knows of Greek and Hebrew. Do you not see here the devil, the enemy of God's order? With all his mouthing of the words, "Spirit, Spirit, Spirit," he tears down the bridge, the path, the way, the ladder, and all the means by which the Spirit might come to you. Instead of the outward order of God in the material sign of baptism and the oral proclamation of the Word of God he wants to teach you, not how the Spirit comes to you but how you come to the Spirit. They would have you learn how to journey on the clouds and ride on the wind. They do not tell you how or when, whither or what, but you are to experience what they do.[15]

The problem was clear: claims to have such direct inspiration from the Spirit, separate from the word, were ultimately immune from criticism through their acknowledgment only of a subjective, mystical authority. This type of preaching was unregulated by the word and subject only to the tastes and whims of the preacher.

By contrast, Luther and indeed all the other magisterial Reformers were concerned to keep together both word and Spirit. Detaching Spirit from word turns Christianity into a quest for God, a work in which humankind engages in trying to reach out to the divine. Tying Spirit to word makes the Spirit the agent of grace and Christianity into something which seizes hold of the sinner. The spiritualist radicals, in essence, have a form of works righteousness, while those who see the word as

the instrument of God through the Spirit know that salvation is solely of grace.

Calvin is similarly emphatic about the inseparability of word and Spirit:

> Those who, rejecting Scripture, imagine that they have some peculiar way of penetrating to God, are to be deemed not so much under the influence of error as madness. For certain giddy men have lately appeared, who, while they make a great display of the superiority of the Spirit, reject all reading of the Scriptures themselves, and deride the simplicity of those who only delight in what they call the dead and deadly letter. But I wish they would tell me what spirit it is whose inspiration raises them to such a sublime height that they dare despise the doctrine of Scripture as mean and childish. If they answer that it is the Spirit of Christ, their confidence is exceedingly ridiculous; since they will, I presume, admit that the apostles and other believers in the primitive Church were not illuminated by any other Spirit. None of these thereby learned to despise the word of God, but every one was imbued with greater reverence for it, as their writings most clearly testify.[16]

The magisterial Reformers emphasized the need to tie together the word and the Spirit. They could not be separated, let alone set in some kind of opposition to each other. To separate them would lead simply to a nightmare of subjectivity and chaos. As a result, Scripture was set forth as the normative criterion for the public proclamation of God's word. The content of preaching was to be the content of Scripture and thus regulated by the same. Then this would be used by the Holy Spirit to bring God's grace to bear on those who heard.

Preaching regulated by Scripture was no dead letter. As Calvin says just two paragraphs after the above quotation, commenting on 2 Corinthians 3:8, "The Holy Spirit so cleaves to his own truth, as he has expressed it in Scripture, that he then only exerts and puts forth his strength when the word is received with due honor and respect."[17] Faithful preaching of the word in accordance with Scripture brings the Spirit to bear and is the means by which the Spirit accomplishes his powerful work.

This is important because it helps reinforce that preaching is not, for the Reformers, simply a matter of communicating information. It is a real means of grace. Indeed, it is the principal means of grace because it bridges the gap between the ancient text of Scripture and the congregation, bringing the promise of Christ to a present reality. God's word preached is thus confrontational, creative, and transformative. For Luther, God's grace is only manifest in the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ, and all preaching must ultimately bring Christ to bear on the congregation. Christ is the embodiment and fulfillment of God's gracious purposes as set forth in the Bible. To speak meaningfully about Christ is to explicate what the Bible says about him. The preacher must regulate his declarations by the facts set forth about Christ in Scripture and also by the commands and the promises that drive home the personal and existential urgency of the gospel message. As Luther declares in *The Freedom of the Christian Man*:

> It is not enough or in any sense Christian to preach the works, life, and words of Christ as historical facts, as if the knowledge of these would suffice for the conduct of life; yet this is the fashion among those who must today be regarded as our best preachers. Far less

> is it sufficient or Christian to say nothing at all about Christ and to teach instead the laws of men and the decrees of the fathers. Now there are not a few who preach Christ and read about him that they may move men's affections to sympathy with Christ, to anger against the Jews, and such childish and effeminate nonsense. Rather ought Christ to be preached to the end that faith in him may be established that he may not only be Christ, but be Christ for you and me, and that what is said of him and is denoted in his name may be effectual in us. Such faith is produced and preserved in us by preaching why Christ came, what he brought and bestowed, what benefit it is to us to accept him.[18]

This is a powerful wake-up call to preachers. The purpose of preaching is not to tell people how to live their lives, or how to handle crises, or to reach their full potential, whatever that may be. Nor is it simply to describe Christ to them and outline what he did. Nor is it to inspire warm, fuzzy feelings about him by playing on their emotions. Christ's story is emotionally powerful, but that is not where its significance lies. Christ is not simply an inspiring or moving example. He is the manifestation of God's grace, coming from outside to bring salvation to a sinful and lost people. A preacher's task is to focus on that. Their job is to press the personal, existential significance of Christ on those who hear and to make them realize that Christ's words and actions are of immediate and eternal significance to them. The preacher must not think of himself as a lecturer, simply explaining the historical events that Christ has died and risen. I have to bring out *why* he has died and *why* he has risen. I have to drive home the personal importance of this for each and every person listening. They need to know that what I say to them on a Sunday morning is going to be the most vital thing they hear all week. That is what it means to say that preaching is a means of grace.

Conclusion

In his Lyman Beecher Lectures, delivered at Yale in 1907, Scottish congregationalist theologian Peter Taylor Forsyth began with this dramatic statement:

> It is perhaps an overbold beginning, but I will venture to say that with its preaching Christianity stands or falls. This is surely so, at least in those sections of Christendom which rest less upon the Church than upon the Bible. Wherever the Bible has the primacy which is given it in Protestantism, there preaching is the most distinctive feature of worship.[19]

In saying this, Forsyth stands in the line of Protestant thinking that goes right back to the Reformation. Forsyth understood that preaching is not ultimately about communicating information, still less entertaining a crowd for a few minutes on a Sunday morning. It is about life and death, an utterly serious undertaking through which God confronts people with their sin and his grace in Christ.

For those who hold to the Reformation understanding of salvation by grace alone, the proclamation of the word of God is the principal means of grace. It is the thing that God uses to force people to reckon with their sin, to drive them to their knees in repentance and then to draw them to the resurrected Christ by faith. After all, what is faith but God-given trust in the promise of God's word as it is declared week by week to the congregation?

For this reason, the Reformers' emphasis on grace alone cannot be detached from the specific form of church life which they advocated. We often think that form and content can be routinely separated. There is a whole industry committed to this, where talk of contextualization seems to trump everything else. Certainly attention to context is important, and the Reformers understood this. Luther once bewailed a student who preached on the merits and joys of childbearing to an audience made up of elderly widows and spinsters. And all the Reformers were committed to Scripture and preaching in the vernacular. But the meat of the message was not a function of context but of the content of the word of God.

For those who believe in the Protestant *sola* of grace alone, this implies that the reading of the word must occupy a prominent place in every service. The reading of the word is foundational to receiving God's grace, for there he reveals himself and describes and interprets the human condition and his great saving acts in response. And preaching must lie at the very heart of the service, for that is where God meets his people as the preacher takes the text of Scripture, expounds and applies it, and trusts the Holy Spirit to take those words and use them to transform those who hear them.

This has several implications for ministerial preparation. Preachers need to be well trained and able to speak clearly. They need to be able to rightly divide and apply the word of truth. They need to be able to study. There will always be the occasional Charles Spurgeon or Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who, with little or no formal training were yet outstanding preachers, but they are the exceptions, not the rule, and even they might have been better had they been taught the biblical languages. There is a reason why the Reformers required rigorous study as a prerequisite for pastoral ministry: most aspiring ministers urgently need that if they are to preach the word with any degree of competence.

This view of grace and preaching also puts an onus on congregants. Christians need to attend church with a desire to encounter God by hearing him speak to them through the words of the preacher. It is as they hear God's word and as they grasp it by faith that their hearts and minds will be transformed.

I used to fret that I could remember very few of the sermons I had heard. Now I fret that I can remember very few of the sermons I preach. Still, I remember none of the details from the Latin lessons I took in school, and yet I can still pick up a book of Latin prose or verse and read it. We may have forgotten the details of individual classes we've taken, but our minds are rewired by what we learned. In studying Latin I was changed from someone who saw Latin as an impenetrable code to someone who now delights in the cadences and periods of Cicero.

I believe preaching is like that. The point is not that we remember all the details and can perfectly recall them. Rather, it is the slow, incremental impact of sitting under the word week by week, year by year that makes the difference. That is how we mature as Christians. God uses this means of grace to make us into vessels of his grace. And that is why a Protestant theology of grace must place the clear, powerful, unequivocal proclamation of God's word right at the center.

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1. Author's translation. The Latin original is available in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3 vols. (New York: Harper, 1882), 2:237.

2. *LW* 1:49.

3. *LW* 1:146.

4. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. John King, 2

vols. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847–50), 1:148.

5. Henry Bullinger, *The Decades of Heinrich Bullinger*, ed. Thomas Harding, 4 vols. (Cambridge: Parker Society/Cambridge University Press, 1849–52), 1:38.

6. "But in times past, and before that the Son of God was born in the world, God, by little and little, made himself acquainted with the hearts of the holy fathers, and after that with the minds of the holy prophets; and last of all, by their preaching and writings, he taught the whole world. So also Christ our Lord sent the Holy Ghost, which is of the Father and the Son, into the apostles, by whose mouths, words, and writings he was known to all the world. And all these servants of God, as it were the elect vessels of God, having with sincere hearts received the revelation of God from God himself, first of all, in a lively expressed voice delivered to the world the oracles and word of God which they before had learned; and afterward, when the world drew more to an end, some of them did put them in writing for a memorial to the posterity" (Bullinger, *Decades*, 1:38–39).

7. Thus, and most unfortunately, his very last sermon of 1546 included an appendix which was simply a tirade against the evil of the Jews.

8. *LW* 51:77.

9. "We must bring forth the voice of the law that men may be made to fear and come to a knowledge of their sins and so be converted to repentance and a better life. But we must not stop with that, for that would only amount to wounding and not binding up, smiting and not healing, killing and not making alive, leading down into hell and not bringing back again, humbling and not exalting. Therefore we must also preach the word of grace and the promise of forgiveness by which faith is taught and aroused. Without this word of grace the works of the law, contrition, penitence, and all the rest are done and taught in vain" (*LW* 31:364).

10. As the Reformation progressed, Luther became increasingly concerned that some Lutheran preachers declared only the gospel without also declaring the law. This led to presumption and practical laxity in living the Christian life; see Carl R. Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 159–74.

11. *Institutes* 1.6.2.

12. Bullinger, *Decades*, 1:84–85.

13. *LW* 33:183.

14. *Institutes* 3.21.1 (Beveridge).

15. *LW* 40:147. Earlier in the same treatise ("Against the Heavenly Prophets") Luther declares that Karlstadt's followers might declare him the greatest spirit of all, given that he had "devoured the Holy Spirit, feathers and all" (*LW* 40:83).

16. *Institutes* 1.9.1.

17. *Institutes* 1.9.3.

18. *LW* 31:357.

19. Peter Taylor Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (London: Independent Press, 1907), 1.

CHAPTER 9

The Sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper

> Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?
>
> *Romans 6:3*

> In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."
>
> *1 Corinthians 11:25*

As we continue to look at the practical outworking of God's grace in the church and in the lives of Christians, we now come to the issue of the sacraments. Often neglected in evangelical circles, the sacraments were of vital importance to the Reformers. Indeed, if grace shaped the Reformers' understanding of the nature and importance of preaching, it did much the same for their view of the sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Evangelical Protestants can somewhat sympathize with the passion behind the debates over baptism during the Reformation. If you have an interest in discussing or debating theology, you may have had some disagreements about baptism with someone on the issue. And even if we no longer call for the death penalty for those with whom we disagree, it can still be a heated topic. By contrast, debates over the Lord's Supper often seem too abstract and nitpicky to us today, mostly because evangelicals do not know what to do with it. It is something we do because we are supposed to do it. But for the most part it is not something we understand or appreciate in any profound way.

When we look back to the Reformation, it can be surprising to see how much ink was spilled over the debates about the sacraments. There were few topics debated as often or as heatedly. But why? Why did the sacraments matter so much to the Reformers? In this chapter, we shall explore why they thought so often and deeply about them and also offer some thoughts about what this may indicate about our understanding of grace today. My hope is that it will help us to see the sacraments as a means of God's grace.

Baptism

The Political Background to Baptism in the Reformation

All of the magisterial Reformers affirmed the importance of infant baptism. While Zwingli had a brief moment of hesitation on the issue in the early 1520s, he swung back to the paedobaptist side with a vengeance, even supporting the death penalty for those who deviated on this point.

Why the death penalty? Why treat disagreement on this matter as a capital crime? Part of the reason was political. The society that the Reformers inherited was shaped by the social and theological structures of a church-state relationship that had developed during the Middle Ages. The system assumed the material identity of church and state; every member of the state was also a member of the church, and vice versa. Medieval Christendom found it impossible to assimilate those who refused to belong to one or the other. The Jews provide a great example of this: How do you relate socially and politically in medieval Europe to those who by definition were not part of the church? The answer is: you do not. You marginalize and demonize them. This is why medieval Europe has such a horrific record of anti-Jewish persecution.

In the sixteenth century, various groups of Anabaptists who repudiated the practice of infant baptism were vulnerable for the same reason. Rejecting infant baptism was not simply an ecclesiastical move; it was a revolutionary political and social move as well. Anabaptists were considered dangerous enough to merit execution. That's not to say that there were not also profound *theological* reasons why baptism proved (and continues to be) a source of controversy among Reformation Protestants. One of the most prominent reasons was that baptism was intimately connected to, and reflective of, the Reformers' views of grace.

Baptism and Grace

Scripture is clear that there is a connection between baptism and grace, even if the nature of that relationship is disputed. First, and most obviously, baptism has a christological foundation. Christ himself is baptized by John the Baptist, which provides the occasion for the Father acknowledging his Son and anointing him with the Spirit. Christ himself uses the language of baptism in Luke 12:50 to refer to his suffering and his coming work of atonement. He then connects this to the disciples' own future when he comments in Mark 10:38–39 that his disciples will be baptized with his baptism. Finally, the Great Commission of Matthew 28 places baptizing at the core of the mission of the church as she brings God's grace to the nations.

In the book of Acts, becoming a Christian and receiving baptism are intimately connected, such that even the baptism by John is seen to have been inadequate (Acts 19:3–5). The language of baptism is also used of the work of the Holy Spirit. One of the contrasts between the time of John and the time of the apostles is that John baptized with water while post-Pentecost Christians are baptized with the Holy Spirit (Acts 11:16).

When we turn to the letters of Paul, the teaching on baptism is just as powerful in the language it uses. Romans 6:3 makes a profound connection between Christ's death and our baptism. Galatians 3:27 makes a similar point. First Corinthians emphasizes that baptism is in the name of Christ (1:13) and is the entry point into the church (12:13).

Given all that we have said thus far—that grace is constituted by God's action in Christ and applied to individuals by the Holy Spirit, and that the church is a work of God's grace rather than the response of men and women to that grace—it should be clear that baptism is first and foremost an act of God. God is the agent in baptism, not the priest or minister who applies the water and pronounces

the Trinitarian formula.

The primacy that the Reformers gave to the word because of their understanding of justification by grace alone through faith alone meant that there could be no baptism without the proclamation of that word. Baptism was significant because it was attached to the word that proclaimed Christ.

Protestants disagree among themselves on the theology of infant baptism and even on its legitimacy. Thus, Lutherans and Presbyterians baptize infants for different reasons, while Baptists repudiate the practice entirely—though even Baptists who agree on the subjects of the rite exhibit some diversity on what they believe its significance to be. In this section, therefore, we will look at some of the influential but diverse approaches to the matter among those who helped to forge the Reformation theology of grace alone.

Luther on Baptism

Baptism was a less contentious matter for Luther than the Mass. In the late Middle Ages the Mass, rather like indulgences, had become a money-grubbing opportunity for the church, whereby the grace of God could be exchanged on the basis of a cash transaction. This contradicted the very notion of a sacrament for Luther. Sacraments were gospel ordinances connecting the promise of God to human beings. They are something God does for us, not something we do for God. The church, thankfully, had not turned baptism into quite the same racket as the Mass.

Nevertheless, Luther did see a trivialization of the sacrament at the heart of the medieval approach to baptism. Medieval piety was focused on penance, and the confessional and the subsequent acts of penitential piety were the major building blocks of the Christian life. Baptism served as an initiation into the church, but after that it lost much of its practical significance. The typical Christian would not have looked to baptism to provide any kind of assurance or help in the midst of life's daily struggles. Luther's Reformation theology was an attempt to reassert the importance of baptism and place it back at the center of the Christian life.

Baptism was of crucial importance to Luther in his understanding of God's grace, and this is best seen from the way in which baptism functioned in his own life. When tempted by the devil, Luther's typical answer was to remind the Evil One that he had been baptized and therefore belonged to Christ. Luther did not point to his good works. He pointed to the objective work of Christ applied to him in baptism for his security at times of spiritual peril.

This was in large part because Luther's path to justification by faith was shaped to a significant degree by his changed understanding of baptism. He came to see baptism as referring not to cleansing or a damping down of sin but as something pointing to death and resurrection.[1] The individual self is dead in sins. In order to be saved, an individual must also die to this sinful self and rise to newness of life. That is the true meaning and significance of baptism. Thus, baptism featured heavily in his 1520 treatise *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, because this new understanding of grace and salvation meant that people also needed to see the new significance Luther was giving to the sacrament. For Luther, the essence of baptism lay in its connection to the promise of Christ. Baptism was signified with water, which pressed the gift of Christ on the recipient. As Christ had died and risen again, so the individual must be identified with him in death and resurrection through the sacrament. Moreover, the whole purpose of baptism was to underline the passive nature of the Christian as a recipient of grace. The dead person cannot rise under their own power. Resurrection is

not an *active* human response. It is itself the powerful, life-giving act of God carried out on the dead person. We will return to the baptism of infants shortly, but we should note that the very helpless passivity of an infant—a point many Baptists today find so problematic about paedobaptism—is actually a key part of the symbolism of baptism for Luther and what it says about grace. Nothing more reflects the onesidedness of grace than the baptism of a tiny, helpless infant who can do nothing for itself.

Yet Luther did not believe that baptism was effective because of a magical power inherent in the elements themselves or in the priest performing the action. Baptism (like the Lord's Supper) needed a linguistic context in which the grace of God in Christ was clearly and plainly declared. Christ always comes through his word. God's grace was primarily effected through his word, and this meant that the liturgical action of baptism needed to be connected to the promise of God. In his 1519 work *The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism*, Luther argues for three things of importance in baptism: the sign, the thing signified, and the faith. The sign is the infant being plunged into water (Luther's preference as to mode was immersion).[2] The significance is death and resurrection, and this is so potent that it marks the baptized off from the unbaptized in a fundamental way. The baptized person is dead—and continually dying—to sin, and risen and continually rising to newness of life. The faith is confidence in resurrection in Christ at the last day.[3]

For Luther, the Christian must grow in faith and come to grasp the baptismal promises for herself over time, but this does not hinder the objective efficacy of the sacrament. Luther is comfortable declaring that the baptized child is sacramentally pure. The infant is declared righteous.[4] Luther sees the struggle between sin and righteousness beginning with baptism and completed only in death.[5] In short, baptism happens once with water, but it captures the essential meaning of the entire Christian life.

Christians from an evangelical background are likely to be confused and possibly disturbed by Luther's high view of baptism. Justification by grace through faith sits very comfortably with the conversionist narrative we find in writers such as John Bunyan, many of the English Puritans, and later figures such as John Newton, John Wesley, and Charles Haddon Spurgeon. For many of a more evangelical or revivalist persuasion, emphasizing the efficacy of baptism seems to threaten the existential urgency of our need for faith.

However, what we see in Luther is a very different conception of the Christian life, one that is rooted in his understanding of grace. Luther does describe a crisis experience in his so-called autobiographical fragment (when he makes an exegetical breakthrough in his reading of Rom 1:17), but it is not clear that he is there talking about what later evangelicals regard as conversion. For Luther, baptism was the moment when he joined the church and became a Christian. And there is consistency within Luther's theology. In a remarkable Table Talk, Luther parallels baptism with preaching and points to the fact that preaching does not depend on the prior faith of the individual:

> You say you don't baptize children because they don't believe. Why do you preach the Word to adults who don't believe, unless perhaps in the hope that they may believe? You do it on the strength of God's command alone. For if you baptize me because I say I believe, then you baptize on account of me and in my name. Therefore, since you don't know whether I believe or don't believe, you do it only because of God's command. It

> isn't necessary to exclude children, since as a rule you baptize all, whether they believe or not. It would be a terrible thing if I were baptized on the strength of my confession. What would you do if you learned privately that a man who publicly desired baptism or the sacrament [of the altar] was an unbeliever? You couldn't deny it to him, and yet you would know that he is without faith. So Christ offered [the sacrament] to Judas. Therefore, anybody at all should be baptized unless he has been publicly convicted of a crime, and let his faith and salvation be committed to God's keeping.[6]

For Luther, both the word and baptism need to be understood in terms of God's grace and thus the priority of God's action. God is only gracious in Christ, and Christ comes from outside as a sovereign, unilateral, gracious decision of God. That which brings Christ is that which brings grace in an objective sense, the reality of which is in no way dependent on the intrinsic faith or reaction of the recipient. In baptism, the combination of sign and word presents the infant with Christ—with God's objective grace. The presence of Christ is not dependent on the faith of the child; rather, the faith of the child is dependent on the presence of Christ. Were Christ not present, there could be no faith because faith would have no object. For Luther, making baptism a sign of the individual's response to God would be to deprive it of that which makes it so important: that it presents and offers Christ and therefore God's grace to the infant. We might also add that the category of baptismal regeneration is not the best way to characterize Luther's position. It is true that he believes baptism makes the infant a Christian, but this is not simply a result of the act itself, as if the water possessed some intrinsic power of cleansing, but rather of the fact that Christ is truly offered to the child in baptism because baptism is attached to the promise of God in Christ, to be received by faith.

Zwingli on Baptism

Of all the magisterial Reformers, Zwingli was the one who dallied, albeit only briefly, with the idea of abandoning infant baptism and connecting the rite to public profession of faith. In part this was the result of the political exigencies in Zurich. Zurich was an independent city ruled by a town council. This gave Zwingli's Reformation a more radical political context because power was not the preserve of an established nobility, as was the case in Wittenberg. Early in the Reformation, various radical figures were part of Zwingli's inner circle. In addition, the hallmark of the Zurich Reformation—a strict emphasis on Scripture as the regulative guide for all aspects of life—meant that all matters pertaining to the church came under rigorous scrutiny.

Yet Zwingli's short-lived dalliance with credobaptism ended with his ferocious support for paedobaptism. In his *Commentary on True and False Religion,* Zwingli's argument for infant baptism is quite simple, and it moved discussion toward the later Reformed emphasis on the covenant of grace. He argued that because his Anabaptist opponents did not consider infants to be damned, they were conceding that they were under grace. Further, if the children of believers were not under grace, they would be worse off than the children of carnal Israel. Granted, his argument may not be compelling today, but in a culture where infant baptism was the default position, it had persuasive power. Furthermore, it points toward a more covenantal understanding of baptism.[7]

This covenantal aspect of Zwingli's thought is clear at numerous points where he draws close parallels between circumcision and baptism. This is not a novelty with Zwingli, since many patristic

and medieval writers, even Luther himself, had drawn the parallel. But Zwingli is careful to develop it in a covenantal direction. In a letter to fellow Reformer Urbanus Rhegius, Zwingli makes it clear that neither circumcision in the Old Testament nor baptism in the New saves in and of itself. However, because infant Jews belonged to visible Israel and received the covenant sign, infant Christians who belong to the visible church should also receive the covenant sign.[8]

Zwingli did not believe that baptism conveyed grace, any more than circumcision had done so. Rather, it sets the infant within the visible church and is a tangible expression of the grace that is available in and through the visible church. It puts the infant in a context of Christian nurture, and it witnesses to those who see others being baptized to the unconditional action of God in graciously building his church. Baptism is a matter of great *corporate* significance. If Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Baptists in their different ways emphasize the significance and benefits of baptism specifically for the recipient of the rite, Zwingli emphasized its benefits for the corporate body.[9]

Baptism in Calvin

Any treatment of the views of the Reformers on baptism needs to include Calvin. So what was Calvin's view on baptism? As with the Lord's Supper, Calvin stands somewhere between the view of Zwingli and that of Luther: the Lord's Supper is not merely a sign or purely symbolic, but nor does it have quite the same real potency that Luther ascribes to it. Calvin's views here connect to his general approach to the sacraments, which he defines as:

> An external sign, by which the Lord seals on our consciences his promises of good-will toward us, in order to sustain the weakness of our faith, and we in our turn testify our piety towards him, both before himself, and before angels as well as men.[10]

At first glance, this seems to be a standard view of the sacraments, similar to what we might find in Augustine, that treats the sacraments as visible signs of invisible grace. The reference to promise, however, adds that important Lutheran insight—the sacrament is to be understood in connection with the word of God. We might even say that it functions as a kind of visible or tangible word, to borrow Augustine's term. Indeed, for Calvin as for Luther, the word must be proclaimed *before* the sacraments because otherwise they are just meaningless, dead symbols.

Calvin develops the idea of the sacraments as seals, analogous to the seals placed on official documents. My will was drawn up by my lawyer and contains specific verbal instructions on how my property is to be disposed of after my death. Yet it is also notarized. An official stamp has been placed on the paper on which it is written, which authenticates the document and gives it authority. This is analogous to how Calvin sees the sacraments. The word of God preached is that which contains the promise of God's grace, and the sacraments seal that grace on our hearts in a tangible manner. This is why preaching is important, for without preaching the seals are meaningless. But it is also why the seals are important, for the seals themselves press home the authority of the preaching.[11]

When Calvin discusses baptism, he describes it as consisting of three specific things: that our sins are forgiven in Christ, that we are united to Christ for the mortification of indwelling sin and for newness of life, and that we are united to Christ so as to be partakers in all his benefits.[12] What is

striking about all three is that they all are christological and deeply connected to God's grace manifested in Christ. They are actions that God does. For Calvin as with Luther, baptism is primarily about what God does and only secondarily about our response.

Of course, the issue of the subjects of baptism arises for Calvin as well. Like Luther and Zwingli, he defends the baptism of infants on the grounds of the close analogy between circumcision and baptism, the identity of the promise of grace under the Old and New Testaments, and the covenant between the Old and New Testaments being of the same substance.[13]

Baptism and Grace: A Contemporary Reflection

To this point I've presented a summary of the Reformers' understandings of baptism and its relation to God's grace. It is beyond the scope of this book to attempt an analysis of Calvin's arguments for baptizing children, still less to offer a comprehensive biblical case for such. Instead, I want to raise a simple question: what implication does our understanding of grace have for our understanding of the significance of baptism? My hope is that the answer to this question may prove more productive than the usual debates about subjects and mode.

We can reflect on this from both a paedobaptist and a credobaptist perspective. Some paedobaptists see the baptism of infants as a way of giving thanks to God for a new baby or of dedicating that baby to God's service. In both cases, they understand baptism as something that they do. Calvin, by attaching baptism to Christ and the gospel, insists on understanding it as resting on, symbolizing, and sealing that which God has done.

By contrast, credobaptists will rightly have no time for such ideas as baptism as a means of giving thanks for children or dedicating them to the Lord. Yet many believe that baptism is the way in which we Christians profess our faith. In doing so, they make baptism something that we do, an act that rests on us. For this reason, there are some Baptist churches that will repeatedly baptize people who profess faith, fall away, worry they were not saved the first time around, and seek baptism again on another profession of faith. Such practice rests on the notion that the significance and potency of baptism depends on the faith of the subject. That also misses Calvin's basic point that baptism is to be understood in connection with Christ and his grace.[14]

Yet we must also be wary of allowing the common focus of the debates on the subjects of baptism —believers only, or believers and their children?—to blind us to some areas of deep and significant agreement between Presbyterians and Baptists, especially Baptists who belong to the Particular Baptist tradition. Indeed, as we consider the evangelical church today, I would argue that the big divide on the issue of baptism is not simply—or perhaps not even primarily—between paedobaptists and credobaptists on the legitimate subjects of the sacrament. It is actually between those who see God as the agent in baptism and those who see human beings as the agents in baptism. This may surprise contemporary Baptists, but early Baptists agreed with the Reformed that God is the primary agent of baptism. We can see this by comparing the Westminster Confession on baptism with the 1689 Second London Baptist Confession. First, we'll look at chapter 28 of the Westminster Confession of Faith:

> Baptism is a sacrament of the new testament, ordained by Jesus Christ (Matt. 28:19), not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church (1 Cor. 12:13);

> but also, to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace (Rom. 4:11; Col. 2:11–12), of his ingrafting into Christ (Gal. 3:27), of regeneration (Titus 3:5), of remission of sins (Mark 1:4), and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:3–4). Which sacrament is, by Christ's own appointment, to be continued in His Church until the end of the world (Matt. 28:19–20).[15]

Now, let's consider chapter 29.1 of the 1689 Second London Baptist Confession:

> Baptism is an ordinance of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, to be unto the party baptized, a sign of his fellowship with Him, in His death and resurrection; of his being engrafted into Him (Rom. 6:3–5; Col. 2:12; Gal. 3:27); of remission of sins (Mark 1:4; Acts 22:16); and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to live and walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:2, 4).[16]

Some of the language is different, reflecting the respective sensibilities of Presbyterians and Baptists. But the heart of the theology is remarkably similar and shares in common the central point that the meaning of baptism is found in the action of God. Baptism is not primarily a *response* to God's action. Instead, it *is* God's action. It is grounded in the work of Christ and is a sign (and for the Reformed—and maybe Particular Baptists as well—a seal) of that work to the one baptized.

Given this, I am inclined to say that the difference between a Presbyterian like myself and a Reformed Baptist who holds to the teachings of the 1689 confession is not as great as that between a Presbyterian and a Roman Catholic or between the 1689 Baptist and a Southern Baptist who may see baptism simply as a wet means of professing faith before the world.[17] Perhaps the biggest division over baptism is whether it is a means of grace or not.

The Lord's Supper

The Significance of the Lord's Supper in the Reformation

If the practice of infant baptism served as a point of continuity between the medieval church and the Reformers, dividing them only from the more radical groups of the sixteenth century, the theology of the Lord's Supper not only divided Protestants from Rome but also from one another. In 1529 the German prince Philip of Hesse arranged for Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, and their respective allies to meet at the castle in Marburg to broker a theological agreement. Philip's motivation was really not theological at all: he wanted to establish a military alliance between the German Lutherans in the north and Swiss Reformed in the south, for the mutual protection of their interests in the face of potential hostile action from the church or the Holy Roman Empire. That such an alliance required theological agreement is a sign of just how different the world of politics in the sixteenth century was from our own.

The discussions at Marburg witnessed to significant agreement on a number of theological matters but failed to produce a consensus on one vital point—whether the whole Christ, in his divine and human natures, was present in the consecrated elements of bread and wine at the Lord's Supper. So

acrimonious was the disagreement, and so fundamental did Luther regard that issue, that the Marburg Colloquy marks the formal beginning of the division between the Lutherans and the Reformed. While the two traditions have other emphases that distinguish them, it is this point, that of the nature of Christ's presence in the Supper, that is the real dividing line.

Luther and Zwingli on the Lord's Supper

Why was Luther so passionate about the Lord's Supper? Much of the reason relates to his spiritual autobiography. Luther's early fears of not being good enough to stand before a righteous God were precipitated by the requirement that he officiate at Mass. To put it crudely, Luther was nervous about his responsibility to "make" God and "handle" God as he consecrated and distributed the elements. How could he, a sinful man, come into such proximity with God and survive?

The solution to his fear was Luther's realization that God is gracious to sinners in Christ alone, manifest in frail human flesh, and that the Supper brings the whole Christ, human and divine, to the recipient.[18] Unlike the Roman Mass, where the action was from earth to heaven and the elements were offered up to God, in the Lutheran Mass (and the name "Mass," while transformed in meaning, was retained), Christ came to earth and was offered to the congregants in the context of the proclamation of the gospel.

Luther's thinking on the Mass underwent some development between his initial thinking in 1519 and his eventual clash with Zwingli at Marburg. Initially, his major concern was to refute the Roman emphasis on the sacrificial aspect of the Mass. While he considered the Roman idea of transubstantiation (the notion that the bread and wine turn into the body and blood of Christ) to be an error, he was more concerned to emphasize the Mass as promise. Thus, there was need for vernacular preaching to provide the promissory context of the Supper. Grasping Christ by faith in the word was necessary for grasping him by faith in the Supper. This was the position he presented in 1520 in two important treatises: *A Treatise on the New Testament, That Is, the Holy Mass* and *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church.*[19] Luther captures the kernel of his thinking in the following passage from *A Treatise*:

> If we desire to observe mass properly and to understand it, then we must surrender everything that the eyes behold and that the senses suggest—be it vestments, bells, songs, ornaments, prayers, processions, elevations, prostrations, or whatever happens in the mass—until we first grasp and thoroughly ponder the words of Christ, by which he performed and instituted the mass and commanded us to perform it. For therein lies the whole mass, its nature, work, profit, and benefit. Without the words nothing is derived from the mass.[20]

Here, the priority of the word is clear, and as we earlier noted the connection of the word to God's grace, this reinforces the priority of grace: the action is from God to us, not from us to God. The Mass is full of grace because it is full of Christ. Only in the flesh of Christ can we find God to be gracious toward us, and so the Mass presses on us that God is gracious and merciful. It is powerful and real and offers Christ to the participant just as the word offers the same.[21]

This helps to explain why Luther responded so negatively to Zwingli. Zwingli's theology of the Lord's Supper really had two basic aspects to it. There was a horizontal dimension, which Zwingli derived from a meaning of the Latin word *sacramentum*, a military oath by which soldiers bound themselves together. Zwingli saw the Lord's Supper as a rite by which Christians committed themselves to each other, a communal meal that reinforced communal loyalty and identity:

> [The sacraments] fill the office of an oath of allegiance. For "sacramentum" is used by the Latin writers instead of "ius iurandum," *i.e.*, "oath." For those who use one and the same oath, become one and the same race and sacred alliance, unite into one body and one people, and he who betrays it is false to his oath.[22]

For Luther, such a notion smacks too much of law, not gospel. It sounds like something we do, not something that God does for us, and is thus not a matter of grace.

The second aspect of Zwingli's thought to which Luther objected was his insistence that the words of institution be understood symbolically, that "this is my body" actually meant "this symbolizes my body." For Luther, this cast the Supper as nothing more than a memorial, with the benefits it offered being the opportunity for remembering the sacrifice of Christ. Zwingli writes:

> Yet the sacraments do work faith, historical faith; for all festivals, trophies, nay, monuments and statues, work historical faith: that is, call to mind that a certain thing once took place, the memory of which is thus refreshed, as was the case with the festival of the Passover, among the Hebrews and of the *seisachtheia, i. e.*, removal of debts, among the Athenians, or that a victory was won at a given place, as was the case at Ebenezer [1 Sam. 7:12]. In this way, then, the Lord's Supper worketh faith, that is, signifies as certain that Christ was born and suffered.[23]

This view was anathema to Luther on three grounds. First, it reads the words of Christ symbolically when Luther believed that they should be read literally. Second, it removes from the Supper the incarnate Christ, and only in the incarnate Christ does one find the gracious God. Third, by making the Supper a memorial, it again makes the benefit it provides something dependent on the recipient, not something objectively offered to the recipient. To use Lutheran terminology, this makes the sacrament law, not gospel, and therefore not a matter of grace.

Underlying the differences between the two men was a major christological disagreement. Luther believed that there was a direct communication of properties between the divine and human natures in the incarnation, while Zwingli thought the communication was indirect and to the person. In layman's terms (as it relates to the Lord's Supper), this meant that Luther thought the humanity of Christ was present wherever the divinity was present. Zwingli thought that Christ's body was localized in heaven—that any talk of his presence here on earth could only be spiritual. That was objectionable to Luther because it removed the humanity of Christ from the elements. He believed that Zwingli's Christology made the Supper law, not gospel. Indeed, this was ironically what he regarded as the fundamental error of the Roman Catholic Mass, that it made the Supper a work—though the fact that the Roman Catholics still believed the body and blood were really present made their error less serious than that

of Zwingli.

Calvin on the Lord's Supper

It is against the background of the conflict between Luther and Zwingli that John Calvin's approach to the Lord's Supper should be understood. From early in his reforming career, Calvin showed a preference for Luther over Zwingli, in large part because of the way he regarded Zwingli as reducing the Supper to a mere symbolic memorial. Calvin believed the sacraments are signs and seals of the promises of God that have a real importance and impact on the believer. Yet Calvin could not follow Luther in his Christology. Luther's belief in the direct communication of attributes jeopardized the reality of Christ's humanity. If, for example, God's property of ubiquity was directly communicated to the human nature, then the human nature became ubiquitous, and therefore in a very real sense Christ's human body was unlike any other human body. Calvin, like Zwingli, believed that the human body (and soul) of Christ is located at the right hand of the Father until his return in glory at the end of time. Thus, Calvin's treatment of the Lord's Supper offers an account of the sacrament that attempts to avoid mere memorialism and strives to do justice to the seriousness that Paul attributes to the sacrament in 1 Corinthians 11, while also avoiding the christological problems of Luther's position.

As in baptism, in the Lord's Supper Calvin sees the believer's union with Christ as crucial. Because God has united himself in the person of his Son to human flesh as part of the great economy of grace, so Christ's flesh is of supreme benefit to us. It is our union with the incarnate Christ by faith that saves, and Calvin characterizes this with the language of eating or feeding. In the Lord's Supper, to speak of eating Christ's flesh and drinking his blood in purely memorialist terms is thoroughly inadequate and fails to engage the profound, biblical teaching on this matter.

Granted, there certainly is a symbolic aspect to the Supper. Eating and drinking the elements reminds us of Christ's work on our behalf, his sacrificial death for our sins; and as bread and wine nourish the human body, so Christ's body and blood nourish the human soul.[24] It also impresses on the partakers their union with Christ and therefore their standing as heirs of all that belongs to him.[25] Yet, for Calvin, there is more to the sacrament than just that which it symbolizes. There is a real feeding, by faith, on the body and blood of the Lord Jesus.[26] This feeding is not coterminous with the physical eating of the elements advocated by the Lutherans. Rather, it is a spiritual feeding. The Holy Spirit unites us to Christ, thereby enabling us to feed on the flesh and blood of Christ by faith:

> But though it seems an incredible thing that the flesh of Christ, while at such a distance from us in respect of place, should be food to us, let us remember how far the secret virtue of the Holy Spirit surpasses all our conceptions, and how foolish it is to wish to measure its immensity by our feeble capacity. Therefore, what our mind does not comprehend let faith conceive, viz., that the Spirit truly unites things separated by space. That sacred communion of flesh and blood by which Christ transfuses his life into us, just as if it penetrated our bones and marrow, he testifies and seals in the Supper, and that not by presenting a vain or empty sign, but by there exerting an efficacy of the Spirit by which he fulfills what he promises.[27]

In other words, the Supper makes a difference in that it offers a true, spiritual feeding on Christ in a way that is powerful and in line with Calvin's view that the sacraments are not just signs or memorials of God's promises but are also seals of the same, that they make a tangible difference.

We might say that Calvin uses the Holy Spirit to solve the geographical problem with which Luther and Zwingli were faced: How does the language of body and blood apply to the bread and wine, given that Christ has ascended to heaven? Luther did it by extending the scope of Christ's humanity to be present wherever his divinity was present. Zwingli did it by essentially denying the reality of Christ's presence at all and arguing for what one might somewhat caustically call a "real absence." Calvin points to the role of the Spirit to unite the believer to Christ and so overcome this distance. In this way Calvin can speak of a real feeding by faith on Christ in the Lord's Supper.

More Than a Memorial?

I suspect that the default position for most evangelical Protestants today is some kind of Zwinglianism. The idea of the Lord's Supper as a memorial has obvious biblical support ("Do this in remembrance of me" [1 Cor 11:24]) and the advantage of being easy and simple to understand. And yet it would seem that the Bible requires us to see the Supper as more than just a prompt for the recipients to recall the death of Christ. It also reminds us of Christ's absence ("For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" [1 Cor 11:26]). Further, there is a seriousness about the Supper such that Paul even ascribes dire and even fatal consequences to eating and drinking in an unworthy manner (1 Cor 11:29–30). For this reason, I believe Calvin was right to see the Supper as not merely a memorial but also as a means of grace, as something that actually does have an impact on the life of the believer.

One might respond at this point and ask: What "extra thing" do we have through the Lord's Supper that we do not have through the preaching of the word? This eating of which Calvin speaks, what does it add to what the preached word has already given us? The answer to that, on one level, is "Nothing at all!" Both the word and the sacrament that can be attached to that word bring nothing but Jesus Christ. That which I grasp by the word through faith is that which I receive through the sacrament by faith: Christ. Ironically, it is this—that the Supper offers the same Christ as the word preached—that makes the Supper an important means of grace in addition to the word.

However, a few observations might help to reassure us that the sacrament is not superfluous. While the sacrament gives us the same Christ as the word, it does so in a different form, and that is no small thing. The form in which something comes is significant, as a moment's reflection reveals. Take, for example, a husband and a wife. The husband may—indeed should—tell his wife every day that he loves her. That is a verbal declaration and is surely a typical part of a healthy, loving marriage. If a husband never says he loves his wife, there is almost certainly something wrong in the relationship. On occasion, however, he will also attach to that verbal statement a gift—say, a bunch of flowers, or a box of chocolates, some perfume, or a piece of jewelry. The gift is indicative of nothing that his words have not communicated. Indeed, if he never utters the words "I love you" and yet occasionally hands over a gift, the wife might legitimately wonder what exactly the gift means. The words that surround it, that are part of the marriage on a daily basis, are important for seeing what the gifts signify when they are given. So the gift represents nothing other than what the husband has already said to his beloved spouse.

But note as well that the gift itself makes a difference. It makes a difference when a husband backs up his words with actions, even if such actions might be relatively trivial in form. How much does a box of chocolates cost? A few dollars. Not even a day's pay. And yet the gift can mean much as a tangible statement of the love that the husband verbally expresses every day.

To prove the importance of presents in reinforcing or sealing the idea of love, think of the likely outcome if the husband decides not to give his wife a gift on her birthday. If he offers as his defense the fact that he tells her he loves her every day and the gift is unnecessary, it is highly unlikely that such a defense will prove satisfactory to his wife. Indeed, I would not recommend that any reader be so rash as to try that experiment at home.

We can apply this analogy to Calvin's understanding of the Lord's Supper. The Supper gives us the same Christ to feed on in a different way from that provided by word alone. It involves taste, touch, even sight for those not blind. The Supper enriches the way we receive Christ—not that it is necessary for salvation, any more than a ring is necessary for a marriage, but it does reinforce and seal the promises. My wife may look at one of the rings I bought her and be reminded of the moment at which I gave it to her, but the ring's significance runs deeper than a mere aid to memory. It embodies and represents my love in a profound way, and when I am absent from her there is a sense in which it makes her feel my presence.

Again, the analogy is imperfect. The point is this: the Lord's Supper is more than a memorial. If it were just a case of recalling to mind the death of Christ, then words would seem quite adequate for the task. But the Lord's Supper is a meal, and when we meet with friends over a meal, there is something intangibly intimate that is not present when we simply chat with them at the office or talk over the telephone. That Christ eats with his disciples and commands his followers to do the same again speaks of an intimacy and of a presence in a way that something intended as a mere memorial does not.

The Lord's Supper is a means of grace because when it is attached to the word it presses Christ on the believer in a powerful way. To eat the bread and drink the wine is not only to be reminded of Christ's sacrifice, but it is to know his presence through the Spirit. The Lord has given in the Supper a great gift to the church, one which those who take his grace seriously would do well to observe.

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1. See chapter 3.
2. *LW* 35:30.
3. *LW* 35:35.
4. *LW* 35:32.
5. *LW* 35:30.
6. *LW* 54:98–99.
7. See C. N. Heller, ed., *The Latin Works of Huldreich Zwingli*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: Heidelberg, 1929), 197.
8. W. J. Hinke, ed., *The Latin Works of Huldreich Zwingli*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Heidelberg, 1922), 42–43.
9. On this point, see the helpful exposition of Zwingli on baptism in J. V. Fesko, *Word, Water and Spirit: A Reformed Perspective on Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2010), 60–65.

10. *Institutes* 4.14.1 (Beveridge).

11. *Institutes* 4.14.5.

12. *Institutes* 4.15.1, 5, 6.

13. *Institutes* 4.16.

14. I am conscious that many Baptists may disagree with my presentation of their views here. To clarify: I am referring to popular Baptist practice in order to highlight the significance of Calvin's point, not to carefully thought-out theologies of adult baptism, especially (though not exclusively) those developed within the Particular Baptist tradition. Sadly, such theologies are often as irrelevant to Baptist practice as covenant theology is to many Presbyterian congregations. To quote Cicero (who had no views on baptism at all), "*O tempora! O mores!*"

15. Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 4:266.

16. Ibid., 4:566.

17. To qualify, there are many Southern Baptists today who see baptism as much more. E.g., Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, eds., *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007).

18. For a treatment of *solus Christus,* see Stephen J. Wellum, *Christ Alone—The Uniqueness of Jesus as Savior* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017).

19. These texts can be found in *LW* 35 and 36 respectively.

20. *LW* 35:82.

21. For a more thorough discussion of the practical pastoral significance of Luther's understanding of the Lord's Supper, see Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, 144–56.

22. Hinke, *Latin Works of Huldreich Zwingli*, 2:259.

23. Ibid., 2:254–55.

24. *Institutes* 4.17.1.

25. *Institutes* 4.17.2.

26. *Institutes* 4.17.5.

27. *Institutes* 4.17.10 (Beveridge).

CHAPTER 10
Prayer

> Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.
>
> *Hebrews 10:19–22*

Throughout this book we've see that the Reformers' understanding of grace, following Paul as refracted though Augustine, accented the prior unilateral action of God in salvation. Grace emphasizes that salvation is something God does. In recent chapters, we've looked at how this emphasis on the activity of God in salvation is worked out in the church as both an act of grace and through the means of grace—the word preached and the sacraments. The Westminster Shorter Catechism adds one further means of grace, which, at first glance, may come as something of a surprise:

> Q. 88. What are the outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption?
>
> A. The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption, are his ordinances, especially the word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.

We've already seen why the word and the sacraments are on this list. God's promise endues them with saving power; God is the agent when his word is preached, when baptism is administered, when the bread and the wine are distributed. But prayer? Prayer is not the act of God mediated through means. We think of prayer as the response of a human being when confronted with God's grace. Indeed, the discussion of prayer in the Heidelberg Catechism comes under the third section—the "gratitude" section, which speaks of our response to God. So why did the Westminster Divines choose to list it as a *means* of grace, not a response to grace?

Reading the works of the Reformers (who predated the Westminster Divines by several decades)

does not give us an immediate answer. In this chapter I want to offer a rationale as to why we might consider prayer as *both* a response to God's grace and a means of God's grace. A Christian who has a good grasp of God's sovereignty and of the power of salvation in Christ should understand that prayer is never simply a response to the good news but is itself a key part of that good news. Prayer is a means by which God builds up his saints and extends his kingdom.

Reformation Prayer

The primary focus of Reformation polemics on prayer was the notion of the intercession of the saints. It addressed the idea that certain saints in heaven could plead on behalf of the living and gain favor with God for them. Ironically, a classic example of this medieval notion in practice comes from Martin Luther himself. When caught in a violent thunderstorm in 1505, Luther cried out: "Saint Anne, save me, and I will become a monk!" That was a fateful prayer because it led Luther to the Augustinian cloister in Erfurt, and the rest, as they say, is history. Luther's prayer that day triggered events that would eventually lead him to refute the practice of praying to saints, yet at the time his response to the moment of crisis was entirely conventional. Saint Anne was the patron saint of miners (and, as it happens, of those caught in storms), the business in which Luther's father was engaged, and in praying this way Luther represented the general practice of the time (looking to individual saints for help) and the specific piety of his own home.

I would add that we need to be careful before we dismiss all questions of the intercession of saints as unbiblical. The Bible is filled with examples of individuals interceding on behalf of others. There is Abraham in Genesis 18 praying for Sodom and Gomorrah, and Moses frequently interceding for the people of Israel as they sin during their desert wanderings. While we can read these Old Testament examples typologically, pointing toward the great intercession of the Lord Jesus Christ on behalf of his people, intercession on behalf of others continues both in example and precept in the New Testament. Paul remembers the churches constantly in his prayers. James indicates that the elders of the church are meant to pray for the healing of the sick. The idea of one Christian interceding with God on behalf of another is not an unbiblical idea. Most of you reading this book will no doubt have asked other Christians to pray with you and for you at various times.

Medieval Catholicism, however, made the saints *themselves* the object of intercession. There is a difference between someone praying to God on your behalf and praying to someone else, asking them to intercede for you. Nobody prayed to Abraham in order that he might intercede with God for them. Yet the prayer elicited by the thunderbolt that nearly killed Martin Luther in 1505 rests on a history of theological tradition and popular piety. In Luther's mind, his physical safety depended on the intercessory intervention of Saint Anne, the patron saint of miners. Saint Anne, of course, was already dead and in heaven. Luther was locating the power of intercession in the person of a departed saint. Luther later came to reject this position because he felt that the theology that surrounded it derogated from the uniqueness of Christ.[1]

This gives us a clue as to why we might regard prayer as a means of grace. For the Reformers, prayer has a christological focus that places Christ's own intercession at the center. The Reformation might well be described as a christological corrective to medieval Catholicism. It presented Christ's mediatorial role, particularly his priesthood, in a manner that transformed the understanding of justification and the sacraments. The priesthood of Christ became the criterion by which medieval

notions of priesthood were critiqued and corrected. This also transformed the Reformers' understanding of prayer because Christ became the sole and immediate focus of intercession.

The Intercession of Christ

As we saw earlier, grace must always be connected to the work of Christ, not simply in its origin in the merciful will of God but also in its execution. This is because grace is not a divine sentiment. It is the concrete, divine response to the human problem of sin and death that is manifested in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. We cannot talk about grace without talking about Christ; grace is Christ, not an abstraction.

One of the implications of this is that the gracious work of Christ is ongoing. Not only did he take human flesh, live in obedience to his Father's will, and die and rise again, but Christ ascended to heaven. There his work continues as he lives to intercede for his people. His intercession is part of the economy of grace and provides the immediate foundation for our own prayers. We can be confident that God hears our prayers because our prayers are presented to the Father by the Son through the Spirit. The Trinitarian economy of grace embraces our prayers and intercessions too.

This is of vital practical importance. Often (and rightly) Christians focus on the death and resurrection of Christ. These are the foundation for the work that he does now, his constant and loving intercession for his people before the Father. Ray Davies of The Kinks sums up the lonely isolation of the modern city dweller in these eloquent lines from his song "Nobody's Fool": "Nobody pleads for me, nobody bleeds for me, I'm nobody's fool and I'm nobody's friend." But Christians do have someone. We can know that *by grace* we are never alone like this. Christ bled for us and pleads for us constantly. The intercession of Christ is a grace-filled doctrine.

God's gracious plan has made Christ both sacrifice and priest. The sacrifice that he offers before God is his own suffering and death, which was completed once and for all on Calvary. He is the Lamb of God. He is the great fulfillment of that to which the Old Testament sacrifices looked forward. Yet his humanity is not significant simply because it provides the sacrifice. It is also the agent on which his priestly intercession is based. Hebrews 7:23–28 affirms Christ's perfection and permanence as priest and states that he ever lives to make intercession for his people. His prayers to the Father save to the uttermost those who come to him.

This truth has deep significance for our lives. Hebrews is the classic text in this regard, although the Gospels, especially John 17, give wonderful examples of Christ's intercession. Christ the Son of God, consubstantial with the Father, is a man of constant, fervent prayer. This is a point that we must take to heart. Hebrews 2:14–18 establishes the necessity of Christ's incarnation by grounding it in his sympathetic identification with human beings. Many christological arguments establish the need for Christ to take human flesh because it was human beings who had sinned in their flesh. This is the underlying logic of the fourth-century work *On the Incarnation* by Athanasius and the eleventh-century work *Why God Became Man* by Anselm. And while this is a key element of any biblical Christology, the writer of Hebrews enriches that picture by adding to it the element of existential sympathy. Christ's incarnation is also necessary because it makes him a sympathetic high priest. Because he has taken on human flesh, he knows, from a human perspective, what it is like to be human.

This means that Christians can be confident that they are represented before the Father by

someone who knows and understands. He shares their human existence, this life of contradiction and pain, in a deeply intimate manner. To have Christ as our sympathetic high priest is an act of grace, and it means that God relates to his people in a special and unique way through his ongoing incarnate life. When we call out to Christ in prayer, he knows not simply *what* we feel as humans but *how* we feel it. And he sympathizes with us.

Prayer is a means of grace because the economy of grace involves the intercession of Christ. That intercession, even now, is what makes God's grace a potent reality to individual Christians. The consubstantiality of Father and Son—that the Son is divine as the Father is divine, and both are one God—means that the Son's intercession will always be heard by the Father and always answered in the affirmative. Were it not so, we could not say that the two are one God. That Christ's intercession is part of his priesthood means that his death and intercession are two aspects of Christ's one role as mediator; principles that apply to the one may be applied to the other.

This means that reflections on the relationship of God the Father to Christ's death can also apply to the relationship of the Father to Christ's intercession. It is, of course, incorrect to conceive of Christ's death as the offering of a Son who is well disposed toward mercy to an angry Father in an effort to persuade him or blackmail him into being gracious to his people. Such a view is absurd. Christ does not die and then present his death to his Father as a bribe designed to change the Father's mind. Christ does not have to plead his case before a hostile God, hoping for the best while fearing the worst. In actual fact, Christ is commissioned by the Father and anointed by the Holy Spirit in order that he might die for our sins. The economy of grace has its origins in the eternal will of God and involves each person of the Trinity in a unified plan. The Godhead is united in the desire to act with grace and mercy toward a sinful people. There is no blackmail or tension between Father and Son regarding the death of Christ or the gracious intention of that death. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all desire exactly the same end.

Since this is true of the death of Christ, it is also true of his intercession. Christ as mediator is sent by the Father and empowered by the Holy Spirit for his role, and all aspects of that role enjoy the mutual agreement of the persons of the Trinity. When Christ sits at the Father's right hand and prays for his people on the basis of his sacrificial work on their behalf, he is not cajoling a reluctant Father into doing something that he does not wish to do. He is simply asking him to fulfill that which he has already purposed to do through Christ's work.[2]

Christians can enjoy perfect confidence in prayer, knowing that the God who has saved them in Christ is the God who prays for them even now and is also the God who answers those prayers in accordance with his perfect will. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit all agree on the purposes of Christ's work—life, death, resurrection, ascension, and intercession—and all guarantee his success. That Christ prays for his people, and asks only what his Father is already committed to granting him, should fill all Christians with tremendous joy.

The Christian's prayer finds its objective, gracious foundation in the prayer of Christ. In John 17, Christ prays for his disciples and his church. That passage not only reveals God's will for the church; it represents a series of genuine requests that he makes to the Father. Christ's prayers are part of the way in which God executes his will. We might say that the Father delights to hear the prayers of his Son and to grant that for which he asks. First, as God, the Son only asks for that which the Father, as God, wishes to grant anyway, and second, the Father surely delights to hear the requests of his Son and to grant them. If earthly fathers rejoice when a child asks for something good and take pleasure in

giving it to them, how much more must this be true of God?

The Intercession of the Holy Spirit

The second gracious foundation of prayer is the work of the Holy Spirit. One of the perennial concerns of Christians is the reality that our prayers are often weak, halfhearted, and sometimes confused. There are also situations where we find that we do not even know for what we should be praying. In this context the work of the Holy Spirit becomes significant in understanding prayer.

Previously, we noted that the Bible and later theologians use the concept of grace in two ways: as the disposition of God in mercy toward those who have rebelled against him, and in reference to the work of God in those people to bring about his gracious purposes. This latter aspect of grace focuses very much on the work of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who indwells believers and the church, making us individually and corporately the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Given the language of temple associated with the Holy Spirit, and the role of the Spirit in the life and work of Christ, it is not surprising that the Bible ascribes significance to the Spirit in the prayers of believers. The key passage in this regard is Romans 8:26–27, which says: "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God." In his commentary on these verses, Calvin points out that we are blind in our addresses to God because, even when convicted of our sins, our minds are often chaotic and disturbed. Yet we can still be confident in God, for though he may seem not to have answered our prayers, we know that the Spirit intercedes for us according to God's will in a profound way that transcends all human understanding. He summarizes his thoughts on the passage in this way:

> And the Spirit is said to *intercede*, not because he really humbles himself to pray or to groan, but because he stirs up in our hearts those desires which we ought to entertain; and he also affects our hearts in such a way that these desires by their fervency penetrate into heaven itself. And Paul has thus spoken, that he might more significantly ascribe the whole to the grace of the Spirit. We are indeed bidden to knock; but no one can of himself premeditate even one syllable, except God by the secret impulse of his Spirit knocks at our door, and thus opens for himself our hearts.[3]

Calvin says that even our prayers are themselves acts of God's grace, brought about through the Spirit, perfected by him, and thus made powerful. The theological underpinnings of prayer make our prayers, though in some sense prayed by us, into means of grace both for us as individuals and for the church as a whole.

Human Prayer as a Means of Grace

One of the perennial questions that often puzzles Christians who have a strong belief in the Pauline, anti-Pelagian notion of grace is this: If salvation depends on sovereign grace and thus divine intervention, why should we pray?[4] This is an urgent issue for many, one of a number of questions

generated by an apparent conflict between a high view of sovereign grace and a desire to maintain a clear understanding of human responsibility and, indeed, biblical piety.

From all that has been said thus far, it is clear that human prayer cannot be understood as in any way cajoling or blackmailing God into doing things that he does not desire to do and that he has not planned to do. That is not a legitimate answer to the question. Perhaps, however, prayer might function not so much by changing God but by changing the one praying? Could prayer be intended to bring our wills into line with the will of God? In this understanding of prayer, we pray to God, and God uses that prayer to conform us to his will.

There is undoubtedly some truth to this latter idea. In the Lord's Prayer, we are taught to say "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." This implies that a part of prayer is our submission to the greater will of God. Communing with God in prayer must inevitably transform us as his people, as we seek not simply to present our petitions to him but to seek and submit to his will for our lives.

There are even hints of this aspect of prayer in the life of Christ himself. It is a mysterious and profound text, but, as he prays in Gethsemane, there is clear allusion to the fact that he is there submitting his will to that of the Father (Matt 26:39, 42). We cannot possibly fathom all that is implied in that statement, yet it is clear that prayer had a real significance for Christ when it came to obeying his Father's will. So it stands to reason that prayer must also play its part in bringing our wills into line with that of God. Surely the very nature of prayer, whereby the one praying is automatically placed in the position of a suppliant to another, speaks of this.

And yet prayer cannot be reduced to this. In Luke 18:1–8, Jesus tells the parable of the persistent widow who continually appealed to a judge until at last he gave her the justice for which she was asking. His application of this is that the elect should cry out to God in prayer day and night and believe that he will hear them. It is not that these prayers merely change the elect by bringing their wills into line with those of God; still less is it that these prayers change God. Rather, God uses the prayers of the elect as one of the means of accomplishing his purposes for them.

Though Christ is God incarnate, his life is marked by constant prayer. The Gospels tell us that he would draw aside to pray (e.g., Matt 14:23; Mark 1:35; 6:46; Luke 5:16; 9:18). He also prays at critical points in his ministry, such as at his baptism (Luke 3:21), in the Upper Room (John 17), and in Gethsemane (Matt 26:36; Mark 14:32). Christ's life of prayer reflects his dependence on his Father during his earthly sojourn and also that his work was accomplished in a deep and important way by prayer. When he prays in Gethsemane, for example, it is not merely a theatrical performance meant to teach us by example about how to pray in difficult circumstances. It is part of God equipping Christ to be that mediator of which the writer to the Hebrews speaks. Something real and important happens in the garden, such that had it not occurred, Christ's ministry would have been deficient in significant ways. Further, as Jesus prays for his disciples during his earthly ministry (e.g., Luke 22:32; John 17), so even now he intercedes for his people at the right hand of the Father. The prayers of Christ for his people have always been a vital part of the way in which God's gracious purposes have been fulfilled in the church and in the lives of individual saints.

Christ also commands and expects that his disciples pray (e.g., Mark 11:25; Luke 18:1). Prayer was a significant part of Christ's own life, and it was also something he expected his disciples to engage in as a means both of strengthening their own Christian lives and of helping to bring about the fulfillment of God's greater purposes (Luke 10:2). We see this aspect of prayer both in the descriptions of church life in the book of Acts and in the imperatives of Paul's letters (e.g., Acts 6:6;

13:3; 21:5; Eph 6:18; Col 4:3). Practically, this means that we must not allow our understanding of God's sovereign grace to eclipse the clear importance and biblical imperative of prayer. Christians pray. It is what we do. So how should biblical examples of prayer be understood, particularly in light of the Westminster Shorter Catechism's claim that it is a means of grace?

Put simply, we can say that prayer is a means of grace because it is one of God's chosen means or instruments for achieving his gracious purposes. Christ is the great example of this, praying for his Father's will to be done and praying for his disciples, both during his earthly ministry and now as he sits in heaven. These prayers of Christ are not a piece of theater. They are part of God's chosen means of bringing about his will on earth.

Thomas Aquinas is the one who expresses this idea most succinctly in his treatment of predestination when he asks the key question: "Can predestination be furthered by the prayers of the saints?"[5] In typical fashion, he first argues for a negative answer. Predestination is eternal and therefore cannot be affected by anything that happens in time. Further, God knows all things. He does not need advice from anyone else on how best to carry out his purposes or on what those purposes might be. Finally, if predestination could be helped by the prayers of the saints, then it could also be hindered by the prayers of the saints. Over against these arguments, Aquinas asserts Genesis 25:21 where Isaac prays for his barren wife, Rebekah, and the Lord hears him and she conceives.

Aquinas then offers his own resolution of the issue. First, he highlights two errors that are to be avoided. Some, he says, use the certainty of predestination to argue that prayers are superfluous because the results of predestination are guaranteed anyway. The predestined will reach heaven, the reprobate will be cast into hell, regardless of any prayers said on their behalf. While this view appears to give credit to a high view of God's sovereignty, it does not do justice to the importance and urgency of prayer as it is described in Scripture. Others, Aquinas notes, fall into the opposite error of believing that predestination and providence *can* be altered by prayer and sacrifices. He sees this as a pagan idea, one that the Egyptians were prone to advocate. While this view seeks to do justice to the importance of prayer in Scripture, it does not allow for a proper understanding of God's sovereignty.

Having laid out two failed options, Aquinas sets forth his own resolution of the difficulty:

> Wherefore we must say otherwise that in predestination two things are to be considered—namely, the divine preordination; and its effect. As regards the former, in no possible way can predestination be furthered by the prayers of the saints. For it is not due to their prayers that anyone is predestined by God. As regards the latter, predestination is said to be helped by the prayers of the saints, and by other good works; because providence, of which predestination is a part, does not do away with secondary causes but so provides effects, that the order of secondary causes falls also under providence. So, as natural effects are provided by God in such a way that natural causes are directed to bring about those natural effects, without which those effects would not happen; so the salvation of a person is predestined by God in such a way, that whatever helps that person towards salvation falls under the order of predestination; whether it be one's own prayers, or those of another; or other good works, and suchlike, without which one would not attain to salvation. Whence, the predestined must strive after good works and prayer; because

through these means predestination is most certainly fulfilled. For this reason it is said: *Labor the more that by good works you may make sure your calling and election* (2 Pet 1:10).[6]

Aquinas makes an important distinction. There is predestination as God's eternal will and decree, and this cannot be altered by the prayers of the saints. Yet this is not all there is to the biblical teaching on predestination. There is also the outworking of predestination in time, something that requires means, and God has appointed prayer as one of these means. We can draw an analogy and say that my decision to visit my mother is the cause for my journey, but I still have to travel from my home to hers in order to accomplish that end. If I do not buy the ticket and board the plane, the journey cannot take place.

The analogy is, like all such analogies, inadequate. My journey is not guaranteed simply because I decide to undertake it. Its success is still completely contingent on me making the necessary travel arrangements and putting them into action. When it comes to God's plan, however, everything that God decides will come to pass will certainly come to pass. Yet God works his purposes out in the created realm and through history. If he wants me to hear the gospel at a certain moment in time, he has to will that all of the contingencies necessary for that to take place do actually happen. These purposes require means, and Aquinas sees prayer as one of the means God uses to accomplish these.

We might press this back to the Trinitarian and christological point that we noted above: our prayers are profoundly connected to the life of God himself and to the relationship between the three persons. God the Father delights to answer the prayers of his Son. In Christ's intercession, there is no cajoling or blackmailing of the Father. The Son is God and thus only asks for that which God the Father wills to give him. Yet the intercession of Christ is the means to accomplishing his priestly office.

So it is with Christians. We do not pray to persuade God to do something that it is not his will to do. Nor do we pray merely to conform our own wills to that of God, though that is undoubtedly one of the purposes of prayer. We pray because the Lord has appointed our prayers as *means* of accomplishing his gracious purposes. It is why Paul asks for the prayers of other Christians for his ministry, just as he is constantly in prayer for theirs. Prayer is both a tremendous privilege and a humbling act. Our prayers are used by God to accomplish his purposes, and that is a spectacular thought. Not only do our prayers through Christ give us a taste of intimate communion with the triune God, but they are a chosen means by which the triune God brings about his will. God's purposes are guaranteed by God himself and are not dependent in any ultimate sense on the strength or fervency of our intercession.

We might add one further aspect to this. God is our gracious heavenly Father. Therefore, he delights to hear and answer our prayers. To draw a human analogy, an earthly father might find it appropriate that his child asks him for something that he wishes to give him anyway, as a means of giving concrete form to the relationship that exists. Thus, God our heavenly Father loves to hear us ask for those things that it pleases him to give us, for in so doing our relationship with him is truly actualized and deepened.

This is one important reason why prayer is means of grace. I pray for myself that I will grow in grace, that God will sanctify me, that God will keep me safe until the final day. And those prayers are

a vital part of God's appointed means for accomplishing precisely those things for which I am praying. And what I pray for myself, I pray for others, and for the church both locally and worldwide. And again, those prayers are a vital part of God's means of accomplishing precisely those things.

A minister friend of mine likes to put the matter of prayer and God's grace this way: "I used to think, If God is sovereign, why should I pray? But now I understand the point differently: If God is sovereign, how can I not pray?" Knowing that our prayers are appointed as one of God's means for achieving his gracious purposes, are rooted in the relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and are thus part of the economy of grace should give us sublime confidence that our prayers will be heard by the Father and answered in accordance with God's all-surpassing wisdom.

Public Prayer

There is one final aspect of prayer as a means of grace that is of great practical significance for the church but is increasingly neglected today—public prayer. Discussion of and training for public prayer is not as common today as it once was, and I suspect this is not so much the result of a defective understanding of God's grace but more likely due to the collapse of the distinction between the public and the private. We live in a world where the nebulous concept of "authenticity" has become a supreme virtue. Authenticity is viewed in part as the abolition of the idea that there should be a difference between how we behave in private and how we behave in public. If private prayer is so often the spontaneous cry of the heart to God, should public prayer therefore not be exactly the same? To this concern that preparing for public prayers in some formal way might make them somehow less than authentic, we might add the general cultural fear of anything that smacks of elitism or stuffiness. The faux intimacy and studiedly casual nature of so much of our public interaction speaks of this. The language of friendship has now been debased to include people on the Internet whom we have never met or interacted with in any meaningful way. Students address professors they hardly know by their first names. Even some children call their parents by their first names. I say all of this not to make a curmudgeonly point (although this casual false intimacy does bring out the curmudgeon in me) but to suggest that there are powerful cultural trends that militate against traditional notions of reverence and respect. All of this works against the idea that we should make public prayer something special and unique.

I believe that there is an important place for formal, well-thought-out, corporate prayer in Christian worship. We need people who lead others through appropriately structured and phrased prayer into the presence of God. But why? Again, if the church is an act of God's grace, then the actions of the church are actions of grace. The preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments make grace a transforming reality in the lives of believers, as does the corporate prayer of the church. Such prayer also offers a paradigm for Christians, showing them how to pray in private. Yes, there are clearly going to be differences in the ways public and private prayer are conducted. There will be a personal intimacy about the latter that the former will—indeed, *should*—lack. But learning to pray requires listening to others, and the only context in which we can really do that is in some kind of public forum, namely, the worship service of the gathered people of God.

The importance of being led in prayer as the people of God is clearly taught in the Bible. When the ark is brought into the temple, we are told in 1 Kings 8 that Solomon stands in the presence of the whole assembly and prays in a fashion that exalts God, instructs the people, and brings a sense of

reverence and awe to the proceedings. In Nehemiah 9, the Levites lead the people in an awe-inspiring confession of sin that is as much a beautiful declaration of who God is and what he has done with his people as it is a prayer. Indeed, it is a confession both of faith and of sin. In each case, the burden of the prayer is to exalt God for who he is and how he has acted toward his people. As the possibility of prayer is the result of God's grace, so the content of prayer is determined by God's grace as well.

These prayers are instructive as examples because they show that there is a place for competent, theologically informed, and reverent leading in prayer in a public context. We think of preaching as a means of grace in part because it is one of God's chosen means of bringing people to maturity in Christ by teaching them about him and as the Spirit uses the word to transform them. Public prayer is similar. It gives people a vocabulary for addressing God, it provides examples of how to address God, and, most importantly, it guides their hearts and minds in appropriate ways at the moment in which it takes place. The people of God are the *people* of God. We have a corporate identity. And the expression of that identity through the unity of a public prayer is a profound enactment of what it means to be the church.

This connects to what we noted earlier about the purpose of prayer. If prayer is something God has chosen to use as a tool for accomplishing his purposes and extending his kingdom, then it stands to (biblical) reason that the prayer of the corporate church is of critical importance. It is noteworthy that the prayer in Nehemiah 9 is a corporate confession. It is not simply that individual Israelites have sinned and need to confess such. The people *as a whole* have done so and need to make their confession. And it is appropriate that competent people lead the congregation in such a prayer. Thus, it is the Levites, the priests, who do so.

Further examples are provided by the Psalms, the great prayer book of ancient Israel and indeed of the church. It is noteworthy that these were written for corporate use, and many of them speak in the plural rather than the singular in expressing prayers to God. The Psalms are means of grace in a number of ways. First, they teach the people of God about God. The Psalms are full of doctrine expressed in and through poetic form. They bring doctrine home to us in a powerfully personal and affective way. Second, they provide the people of God with inspired models of how to approach him in prayer. If we did not have certain psalms (for example, Pss 88 and 137), we might never have known that we could legitimately approach God on such terms. Psalm 88 in particular, with its unremitting darkness and gloom, is a key text for someone suffering from depression and wondering how on earth they might speak to God when darkness seems their only companion. That God placed this psalm in his Bible is indicative of his grace toward his people and is a gracious means by which the desperate and despairing might yet come to God in prayer. This is genuine, biblical authenticity, not one of the many modern counterfeits.

The Psalms offer a realistic view of what a grace-filled life lived in a fallen and depraved world is like. One of the keys to the Christian life is an appropriate horizon of expectation. When a church leader said that the massacre in Paris in November 2015 had caused him to wonder whether there was a God, I wondered: Has this person never noticed that this world is full of such outrages, and indeed many far worse, that this one incident would lead him to doubt God's existence? Had this individual read, sung, and prayed the Psalms, he would have been much better equipped for the Christian life here on earth. It is an act of God's grace that God has equipped us with a Bible that speaks to the whole scope of human life.

This brings me to the question of grace and liturgy. We have noted several times in this book how

liturgy was shaped by the Reformers' understanding of salvation. Liturgy is the most obvious formalization of public prayer because it uses strict, prescribed, set forms. Some evangelicals struggle with this, believing that it tends toward formalism and mindless repetition. To repeat words—other people's words—week after week, so the argument goes, is to do nothing more than parrot an empty verbal form.

Liturgy certainly can lead to such formalism, but Bible reading and the singing of hymns and choruses are vulnerable to the same criticism. The mere addition of a musical setting, as in the case of a hymn, does not guarantee that the words are sung with any real commitment or vitality. Indeed, it is not set forms that cause formalism but an attitude of the heart. Written forms or spontaneously composed prayers can both be examples of dead formalism or vital piety.

Instead of focusing on the form of public prayers, whether written or extemporary, we should give our attention to their purpose as a means of grace, as one of the instruments by which God brings about his gracious purposes in the life of the church. If we do this, then we will be more concerned for content than for whether the prayer is written in advance or comes to mind as the person leads the service. As with the preaching of the word, public prayer needs to make the connection between God and the congregation. The primary focus needs to be God himself. The Lord Jesus gives us the great paradigm of the Lord's Prayer, which starts out by ascribing to God who he is, exalting his name, calling out for the coming of his kingdom and the fulfillment of his will. It then moves to the needs and desires of human beings. In a church where grace is properly understood, the broad liturgical structure of the service will follow a scriptural pattern, will focus primarily on God, and will frame all human requests—from forgiveness of sin to material needs—in light of the identity and action of God himself. This will be reflected in the prayers that are prayed.

So, for example, in a typical Presbyterian church the service starts with a prayer for God's blessing, moves to a confession of sin (followed by a declaration of forgiveness), then to a general prayer for the church, with a prayer on either side of the sermon for the aid of the Holy Spirit, and ends with a benediction. The prayer structure is a means of grace because it reflects biblical priorities and carries the congregation through the various aspects of what it means to be the object of God's unmerited favor in Christ.

For this reason, even though it goes against the strongly democratic instincts of today's church and the notion of spontaneity as a hallmark of that nebulous authenticity that is regarded as such a virtue, I would argue that it is important for those leading in worship to be taught to pray properly in public. The Bible itself gives clear instructions on content and form. The fact that we have the book of Psalms, other examples of corporate prayer, and instructions about avoiding overlong prayers for the sake of showmanship is significant. Prayer is not to be determined by personal whims in private, still less so in public. And the danger with succumbing to contemporary notions of authenticity is that public prayer becomes precisely what Christ himself warned against: a matter of public performance.

Conclusion

At first glance it might seem strange to describe prayer as a means of grace, but it is indeed an appropriate characterization. Prayer, like the church, is not something that is first of all "done" by us. It is done by God and given to us as a means of realizing God's purposes in our lives.

A theology that takes grace seriously will place prayer at the center of the church's life and in the

life of an individual Christian. Grace is not just God's unmerited favor; it is also the way God works in our lives to bring about his purposes for us, and at the heart of that is prayer. Christ prays for his people, sympathizing with them even as he asks the Father to be merciful toward them, to keep them from temptation, and to bring them to maturity. And we pray to God the Father through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit, and these prayers themselves are God's chosen means for achieving his ends.

It should not surprise us that the Reformers took a high view of prayer, public and private, and that those who stand in their footsteps continue to do so. Yes, we believe preaching is nonnegotiable, and we see the sacraments as the great signs and seals of God's grace. But prayer also has its vital place in Christian life and discipleship, a joyous, God-ordained means by which his grace works in and through our lives. While some see a high view of matters such as election and predestination as temptations to indolence and inactivity as Christians, the reality is the exact opposite. If we believe in God's sovereign grace, that he has and does act in Christ to save, and he has appointed the means by which his saving purposes will be executed, then we should be more, not less, fervent in our exercise of prayer.

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1. We might concede at this point that a construction can be placed on this intercession of the saints that is not far from the Protestant practice of having other Christians pray for us. The real danger in the Roman position is not that it involves others praying on our behalf but that it is rooted in a notion of sainthood as something that only a subset of especially spiritual Christians possess. This would seem to make their prayers more effective because of some intrinsic quality that they possess and that derogates from the honor of Christ, which is why Luther came to oppose this notion in later years.

2. The scriptural basis for this is found, for example, in how Christ articulates his relationship with his Father in his speech to the disciples in the Upper Room (John 14–17). Especially significant is the High Priestly Prayer of John 17, which reveals the connection between that which the Father has given to the Son and that for which Christ prays, e.g., vv. 1–2, 9–10, 17–19, 25–26.

3. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. John Owen (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849), 313.

4. Of course, those who reject such a view of grace face their own question on this score: If it is unfair for God to intervene in a sovereign way, why pray for him so to do?

5. *ST* 1a.23.8 (Burns, Oates, and Washbourne).

6. Ibid.

Conclusion

> The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.
>
> *Romans 16:20*

Sola gratia! We are saved by God's grace alone. As we look back to this cry of the Reformation, it is helpful to ask ourselves: What would a "grace alone" church look like today? What would characterize its life as a church? How might we recognize such a church when we see it? The answer to these questions, like the structure of this book, falls into two parts: the first doctrinal and the second practical. But these parts are closely connected. In what follows I offer ten points that show the interconnection and give hints as to the identity of a sola-gratia church.

1. **A Grace-Alone Church Takes Sin Seriously.** We have consistently seen in this study that grace is not simply a sentiment or attitude in God. It is God's concrete response to human sin. This means that a proper understanding of grace depends on a prior, proper understanding of sin and the human predicament.

   Americans are familiar with churches where the gospel is presented as a means of self-fulfillment. Obvious examples are the prosperity preachers who populate Christian TV channels and live with conspicuous wealth. But one does not need to believe in the prosperity gospel in its fullest sense to believe in it in an attenuated yet still dangerous form. If we attend church in order to feel good about ourselves or to learn some tips on how to live better, then we are missing the point. Such attitudes indicate that we see the human problem as one of human psychology or of a lack of knowledge. We fail to see where the real issue lies.

   Our basic problem is not that we have low self-esteem. It is not the myriad problems that afflict ordinary people on a day-to-day basis—grim jobs, failing marriages, unhappy home situations. It is that in Adam we have all sinned, that we stand guilty before a holy God, and that our hearts in themselves are committed to rebellion against him and his rule.

   That is the starting point for the church's understanding of the human condition and for everything that flows from that. Until we see sin as the problem, we will not understand the nature of God's prescribed solution.

   A church that takes grace alone seriously will be known for the fact that she takes sin seriously. Her ministers will preach the holiness of God and call people to repentance weekly. The hymns and songs will reflect this reality, and the prayers will address humanity's guilt before God. No

grace-filled church will be unclear about the problem grace is meant to address.

2. **A Grace-Alone Church Takes Christ Seriously.** If sin is the problem, grace is not simply God's benevolent decision to ignore it and pretend that the fall never happened. Grace in the Bible, and among the greatest exponents of grace in the history of theology, is embodied in the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace is God's action to deal with sin, in Christ and in the application of Christ to the individual by the Holy Spirit. A grace-alone church will not just talk about grace; she will talk about Christ. If we speak of grace without speaking the name of Christ, we are not speaking biblically of grace. In the Bible, grace is so intimately connected to Christ that Christless talk is graceless talk. One common danger among those who speak of grace is talking of it as if it is nothing more than the idea that God forgives sin. If we fail to set our understanding of forgiveness within the context of the economy of salvation and the person and work of Christ, we are not speaking about grace. A church that believes in salvation by grace alone—as the Bible teaches it—will ensure that Christ stands at the center of all that is proclaimed.
3. **A Grace-Alone Church Takes God's Priority in Personal Salvation Seriously.** Predestination remains a contentious topic within the church, as ongoing debates within the Southern Baptist Convention indicate. As I have labored to show in part 1 of this volume, the emphasis on the sovereignty of God's grace that we find in men such as Augustine and Calvin represents an important and nonnegotiable aspect of the Christian gospel. This side of glory we will not be able to answer all the questions that the doctrine of predestination raises, but Paul's doxological statement in Romans 9 indicates that he, too, was acutely aware of the limits of human speculation in this matter. There comes a point when we must stop theologizing and speculating and simply declare God's glory.

   A grace-alone church will be one that unashamedly declares God's sovereign priority over all of creation and his sovereign priority over the church and her people. Only in this way can ministers preach with confidence, knowing that it is not their eloquence that saves but the Spirit using the word to bring people to Christ. Only in this way can pastors confidently counsel people, knowing that, whatever the problem may be, our sovereign, gracious God is in control. Only in this way can the man whose wife of fifty years is descending into the fog of Alzheimer's disease know that all is still well and that, if not a sparrow drops to the ground without the Lord knowing it, his agonies and those of his wife are seen by the Lord and are under his control.
4. **A Grace-Alone Church Takes Assurance Seriously.** Building on this last point, the grace alone church takes assurance seriously. This, as we have seen, was the point where the Reformers broke from the earlier anti-Pelagian tradition on grace. For them, God's sovereign grace meant that Christians could be confident that God was their God and would love and care for them until they were safely home.

   This again is pastorally crucial. To be able to point Christians to a sovereign God who has revealed himself to them as gracious in Christ is perhaps the single most important thing that a pastor can do. When the problems of this fallen world close in on us, as they will at some point, there can be a tendency to see our sin or our suffering or the evil machinations of the world around us as the last word. God's grace in Christ says otherwise, and the church which takes that grace seriously will constantly point her people to that truth with the aim of reassuring them that, whatever comes to pass, God is both sovereign and gracious.
5. **A Grace-Alone Church Takes the Corporate Gathering of the Visible Church Seriously.** For

the Reformers—as for the early church and medieval fathers—the gathering of the visible church was important. In fact, we can say that it was the *most* important thing for them. Certainly, it was so important for the medievals largely because of their high sacramentalism, something the Reformers rejected. But even so, the Reformers believed that the church was God's creation, and that it was the place where grace was found through the proclamation of God's word and the administration of the sacraments.

We live in age in which church is often regarded as an optional add-on to the Christian faith, or as a place we go to learn to understand the Bible, to make some good friends—a context for social interaction. A church which takes grace alone seriously knows that while all those things may be true, the primary reason we go to church is to receive God's grace through the word and sacraments. Christians who take grace seriously know that the church exists before they do and is the place where they are to be discipled as they grow in grace. It is with the gathering of saints on the Lord's Day that we receive what we need, strengthening us to go about our daily callings for the rest of the week.

The challenge for Christians is this: Do we, as individuals, take grace alone seriously? If we do, then we will take church seriously. We will be at church on Sundays. We will be committed to the local body. We will serve. For the local body is where grace in Christ is preeminently to be found.

6. **A Grace-Alone Church Takes the Bible Seriously.** If we take grace alone seriously then we will inevitably take the Bible seriously. The Bible is God's revelation of the history and identity of his people and supremely of his purposes for them as they culminate in Jesus Christ.

   Given this, we may need to spend time reflecting on how the Bible functions in our churches. Is there time given to the public reading of significant amounts of Scripture in the worship services? Do our sermons bring people back to the Bible again and again and again? Are the public prayers suffused with biblical references and biblical allusions? Do people leave church knowing the Bible better than when they entered?

7. **A Grace-Alone Church Takes Preaching Seriously.** Preaching was central to the Reformation because of how the Reformers understood grace. The word proclaimed is not merely information. Sermons do not simply help people to understand the Bible better. The word brings grace. Confronted with sin, people are either hardened or brought to their knees in repentance and then presented with Christ, the author and finisher of their salvation. The pastor needs to follow the Pauline paradigm: proclaim who Christ is, call on congregants to believe on him for their salvation, and then press home the need to live according to the identity they have in Christ. Any sermon that lacks the great indicatives of the Christian faith and fails to press home their existential urgency and practical outworking for the church and for the individual is really failing to preach biblical sermons.

   And remember: preaching is supernatural. The words of the preacher are taken by the Spirit and applied as the word of God to the hearts and minds of the congregation. It is God's primary appointed means of bringing people to faith and of nurturing them in the faith. To understand biblical grace is to understand the means of biblical grace and to take them seriously. The preaching ministry will be central to any grace-alone church, and the training of preachers will be central to any grace-alone theological seminary.

Furthermore, the congregation will take preaching seriously. We live in a world in which listening has become a passive activity. We sit in front of computer screens and televisions, passively watching movies or the news. Some suggest that the clickability of the Web has reduced our attentions spans, and we roam from channel to channel or webpage to webpage, rarely engaging at any level with the material served up to us as so much informational fast food. Yet when we come to church, we must act differently. When the preacher preaches, if we take grace seriously, we need to listen actively to what he is saying. We need to follow their argument, think about the text being addressed, and listen to what the Lord is saying through him. In that way, we will truly benefit from the grace that is there given to us.

The church that takes grace seriously will take preaching seriously. And that means not only making sure the minister preaches the word faithfully but that that proclamation is central to the church's life and that the congregation listens actively to what the minister is saying.

8. **A Grace-Alone Church Takes Baptism Seriously.** I am an apostate Baptist, now a Presbyterian, and one of the reasons for my move was the conviction that baptism is all about God's grace, not our response. There are Baptists, for example of the 1689 Confession variety, who agree with me on this. Therefore, in writing this book I have tried to avoid pressing a strong line on the mode or timing of baptism. Why? Because theologically I think there is room for those who disagree on the subject of baptism to find agreement on the meaning of baptism.

   Baptism is important. Churches that regard infant baptism simply as an elaborate way of giving thanks for the birth of a new baby are not taking it seriously at all, nor are those Baptist churches that rebaptize people every time they fall away and then return to the faith. And in the world of parachurches, there are few things more theologically depressing than being told that baptism is a minor, secondary issue that we can all agree to differ on. Baptism is part of the Great Commission, and in the New Testament it is spoken of in terms that seem quite significant! Baptism is part of God's gracious economy, to be taken seriously by all Christians. And we can find agreement in saying that God is the agent in baptism, baptism is a means of his grace, and all Christians should take their baptism seriously. Baptism reminds us that there is judgment for those who fail to take the obligations of the covenant seriously and fail to make use of the grace which God has given to us in Christ. Baptism is something God gives to us, not something we offer to him or to our fellow believers.

   Grace alone churches should teach about the importance and significance of baptism. Pastors should remind people of their baptism and what it signifies. As Paul would point people back to the fact that they were baptized as the basis for pressing home their new identity in Christ and the great imperatives of the Christian life, so we should do the same.

9. **A Grace-Alone Church Takes the Lord's Supper Seriously.** If baptism is a means of grace, we can say the same about the Lord's

   Supper. As our brief survey of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin has shown, the Reformers took the Lord's Supper very seriously—even allowing their disagreements to split the Protestant movement down the middle. That might have been excessive; but perhaps it would have been worse if they had simply dismissed it as a matter of no importance.

   Today we need to recover an understanding of the Lord's Supper as a means of grace. Yet far too often we find little to no teaching on the Supper in our churches. And when preachers do teach

on the Supper, it is more out of a sense of obligation than a proper understanding of why they are doing it. As with baptism, we need to take the celebration of the Supper seriously, and we need to make sure that there is proper instruction given to congregants over what the Supper means.

Many evangelicals recoil from this on the grounds that it smacks too much of Romanizing tendencies. But we must not allow the excesses of one group to lead us to overreact. Reformers such as Calvin saw the Supper as a means of grace, as something that makes a difference for believers in their daily Christian life. While the Supper is not necessary for salvation, many things that are not strictly and absolutely necessary for salvation are still desirable and helpful. Think about the importance of fellowship with other believers or the practice of daily Bible reading. If that is true with these practices, how much more is that the case with something that the Lord has commanded should be done? The Lord's Supper gives us Christ—in a different form from the word, but gives us Christ nonetheless, and a church that believes in grace alone will be a church where the Lord's Supper is considered to be important.

10. **A Grace-Alone Church Takes Prayer Seriously.** Finally, a church that believes in grace alone will inevitably take prayer seriously, both public and private. This is because a church that takes grace seriously knows that she exists only in complete and total dependence on the Lord who bought her. Such a church will know that it is vitally important to call out to the Lord for all things, that conversions, Christian growth, discipleship, and worship all depend on God himself. Like Aquinas, Christians who understand grace know that their prayers are one of God's chosen means for accomplishing his purposes and thus prayer will characterize their lives, corporately and as individuals.

Grace is a vital doctrine, not simply for the church's theological confession but also for the church's theological practice. It is a doctrine with profound theological, existential, and practical consequences. This is why the idea of salvation by grace alone has spoken so powerfully to believers throughout the ages. It also explains why grace alone came to the fore at particularly critical junctures in church history, such as the fifth century and the Reformation. It exalts God as sovereign, points to the desperate and fallen condition of sinful humanity, and connects the two in the all-sufficient and powerful saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Can there be a sweeter sound than "amazing grace" in the sinner's ear?

This is one reason why we need to pick up the doctrine again today and give it the central place in our theology that it has had in times past. Ours is an age in which cultural casualness and a predilection for the categories of therapy have infiltrated many wings of the church, simultaneously lowering our view of God's transcendent holiness and of our own sinfulness and inability to stand before him in our own strength. We have made God trivial as we have made ourselves important. Grace counters both. It places the Lord back on his throne, and it forces us to realize the depth of our own moral depravity.

But we also live in an age that attempts to provide trivial answers to our deepest needs. We might deny our sinfulness and God's holiness for a time. We might temporarily distract ourselves from the reality of our own mortality and the judgment that is to follow. But sooner or later we all know that we need something more than entertainment or a self-help book to address the deeper issues of life: evil, suffering, death. In this context, we need a serious theology and a serious understanding of human existence. And at the heart of any such lies a biblical doctrine of grace, one which does not deny the very real problems of life in a fallen world but which nonetheless

asserts God's loving sovereignty over his people come what may.

Yet, as we noted in this final chapter, to say that one believes in "grace alone" is only compelling if that is accompanied by a certain form of church life—with preaching, sacraments, and prayer right at the center. These things, simple as they are, are the divinely appointed means of bringing the grace of God into our lives. Grace is a doctrine that should grip our whole being because it confronts our whole being in these simple things: the words of pastor, water, bread and wine. Each Sunday as we partake of the means of grace, we are being transformed into that which God would have us to be, strengthened for challenges that lie in the week ahead, and being drawn closer to heaven, our eternal destiny. Such is the power of God's grace given to us through his church.

No church can ever be perfect—who is sufficient for these things? Only those who are made so by the grace of God.

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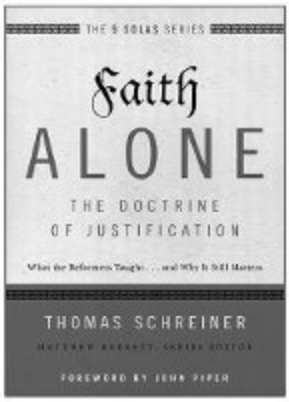
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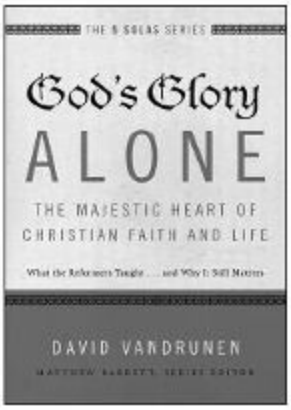
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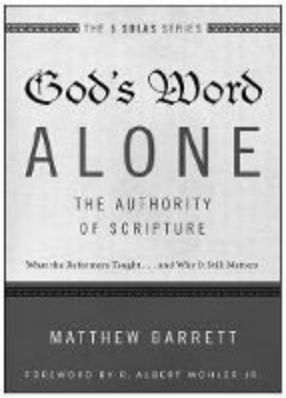
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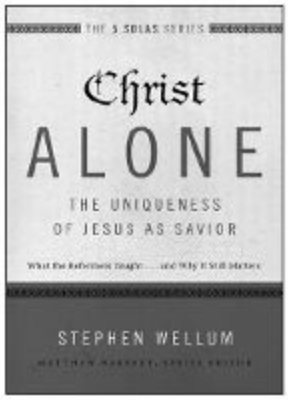
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