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The Theology of Grace

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The Theology of Grace.¹⁾

FRIENDS OF THE FACULTY AND OF THE STUDENT-BODY OF CONCORDIA SEMINARY: —

We are met here to commemorate the death, to commemorate the life and work, of Dr. Francis Pieper, the faithful witness of the Gospel of grace.

His ministry had one object. Like St. Paul, who declared: "But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the Gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20, 24) — like St. Paul Dr. Pieper determined not to know anything in the Church and in the Seminary save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified, save the grace of God in Christ, that bringeth salvation and hath appeared unto all men.

From first to last he testified the Gospel of salvation by grace. In the first booklet he wrote, in 1880, on the Augsburg Confession, he said: "All false religions are alike in this, that they instruct men to gain God's grace and salvation through something good in themselves. Holy Scripture, however, teaches that the righteousness which avails before God and saves is the righteousness of Christ, which God through grace imputes to him that believes in Christ."²⁾ And in 1931, in his last public utterance, Dr. Pieper declared: "Scripture teaches that God has already declared the whole world to be righteous in Christ, that therefore not for the sake of their good works, but without the works of the Law, by grace, for Christ's sake, He justifies, that is, accounts as righteous, all those who believe in Christ, that is,

1) Since at the time of Dr. F. Pieper's death the majority of the students of Concordia Seminary had been dismissed for the summer vacations, a special service commemorating the sainted teacher's life and work was held in the Seminary chapel when regular work had been resumed in fall. It was on this occasion that this address was delivered.

2) *Das Grundbekenntnis der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, p. 94.

believe, accept and rely on, the fact that for Christ's sake their sins are forgiven." 3) And that has been his ministry all these years. Faithfully he employed the great gifts bestowed upon him by his gracious Lord: his thorough knowledge of Scripture and of theology, the keenness of his intellect, the clearness of his thinking, and the clarity of his style, and that sublime eloquence which gives utterance to the firm assurance and the fervent joy and gratitude lodging in the heart of one who has experienced the wonders of grace—he put it all to one use: to teach and impress, to maintain and spread, the sweet Gospel of grace.

A faithful witness of the Gospel of grace, he preached it in its fulness. He did not abate one jot or tittle of it. He believed, and he confessed, these glorious truths: that the grace of God, gained by Christ, is a universal grace; that salvation comes to the sinner by grace alone; and that it is conveyed to him through the Gospel and the Sacraments. Hear his words: "The apostle does not say: God was in Christ, reconciling one half or the fourth part of the world unto Himself, but 'the world.' The world—and here there is no restriction nor limitation—has been reconciled to God nineteen hundred years ago by the Lamb that took away the sins of the world, has been absolved in God's heart of all sin and guilt, has been justified." 4) Hear him again: "The Lutheran Church teaches most positively that man is converted, justified, and saved by grace alone (*sola gratia*). Any admixture of man's cooperation, achievement, worthiness, less degrees of guilt, own works, or whatever name it be given is rejected by the Lutheran Church as a radical perversion of the Christian religion." 5) And again: "As the Lutheran Church teaches the *gratia universalis* and the *sola gratia*, so also it teaches and insists that the grace of God, gained by Christ, is most certainly offered and conferred through the external means of grace." 6) Dr. Pieper kept the theology of grace inviolate. It must not be curtailed in any way. It must not be compromised by any sort of compromise. He treasured and preserved every single feature and phase and aspect of it.

For it is the article of supreme importance. It lies at the center of the body of Christian doctrine. All other articles either lead up to it or are based on it. And the perversion of any doctrine has its roots in the perversion of the doctrine of grace. Dr. Pieper puts it thus: "In order to retain the purity of the Christian doctrine, it is not merely helpful, but absolutely necessary to know and to maintain that justifying and saving grace is *favor Dei propter Christum*." 7) And thus, just as in Scripture every doctrine is brought into relation

3) *Brief Statement, etc.*, § 17.

4) *Lehre und Wehre*, 75, 199.

5) *Atlantic Dist.*, 9, 26.

6) *Atlantic Dist.*, 9, 36.

7) *Chr. Dog.*, II, 12.

with the doctrine of grace, Dr. Pieper, the exponent of the theology of grace, would inevitably, whatever *locus* he was treating, on whatever subject he was writing, begin or end with this article. It dominated his heart, and out of it, and back to it, flowed all his theological thinking.

Again, it is the article of supreme importance because the sinner absolutely needs it: Unless grace does all, absolutely all, the sinner, helpless in every way, must perish. And unless grace is offered to all, without restriction and limitation, the terrified sinner must despair. Dr. Pieper never tired of inculcating this. "Every poor sinner stands in need of, and must cling to, both the unrestricted universal grace and the unrestricted 'by grace alone' lest he despair and perish."⁸⁾ And again: "These two truths are the rod and staff that must support us on our pilgrimage in this world if we are to reach our heavenly home, gained for us by Christ at so great a cost."⁹⁾ And, presenting the matter from another angle: "*Der im Evangelium ausgesprochene gratuius Dei favor propter Christum ist der unbewegliche Gnadenhimmel, der ueber die christliche Kirche ausgespannt ist und unter dem die Christen durch den Glauben wohnen und wirken. Durch das Anschauen dieses Gnadenhimmels ENTSTEHT der Glaube, wird der Glaube ERHALTEN und ist der Glaube ein lebendig, schaeftig, taetig, maechtig Ding.*"¹⁰⁾ Nothing less than sole grace and universal grace will serve the sinner. And by the grace of God many who had before been trusting in themselves in the hour of utmost need did cast themselves on the *sola gratia*. Dr. Pieper was wont to point to the case of Copernicus, the Roman Catholic, to the inscription on his tomb: "Not the grace that Paul received do I crave nor the favor by which Thou gavest pardon to Peter, but that grace only that Thou didst grant to the thief on the cross, that only I ask for."¹¹⁾ He would point to the case of Grotius, the Arminian, who on his death-bed, under the ministration of a Lutheran theologian, found true comfort in the article of free grace. "To this, and to this only, the one [the Lutheran Quistorp] points; in this, and in this only, the other [Grotius] rests." Trench."¹²⁾ He would point to the case of Chrysostom, who in his writings infringed on the *sola gratia*, but face to face with God prayed: "As Thou, O Lord, didst not repel one who was like me, that sinful woman, that harlot, when she approached and touched Thee, mayest Thou be moved by the same mercy towards me, the sinner, as I approach and touch Thee."¹³⁾ Nor will anything less than "grace for all" do. Even Calvin declared that in the hour of doubt and spiritual affliction one must look to those passages of Scripture which speak of universal grace.¹⁴⁾

8) *Brief Statement*, etc., § 16.

9) *Lehre und Wehre*, 72, 297.

10) *Chr. Dog.*, II, 13.

11) *Atlantic Dist.*, 9, 33.

12) *Chr. Dog.*, II, 444.

13) *Atlantic Dist.*, 9, 33.

14) *Chr. Dog.*, II, 54.

The article of saving grace must therefore be preserved in its purity and integrity. It is a matter of life and death to the Church. The faithful witness in our midst ever reminded the Church of what this article means to her. Hear his ringing words: "The Christian Church would be committing suicide if she relinquished the doctrine of the *sola gratia*." Again — and let us hear the words in the original that we may the better visualize the man as he stands before us with flashing eye, thundering into our ears God's message: "*Lassen wir die Lehre, dass wir aus Gnaden ALLEIN glaeubig, gerecht und selig werden, FUER UNSERE PERSON fahren, so gehen wir selbst verloren. Bezeugen wir diese Lehre nicht als KIRCHE, so sind wir als Kirche nichts nutz in der Welt. Wir sind dann nicht mehr das Salz der Erde, sondern nur noch in den Mist nuetze. Wehe der Missourisynode, wenn sie aufhoeren sollte, die sola gratia zu bezeugen! Sie verdiente dann, in alle Winde zersprengt und so gruendlich vom Erdboden gefegt zu werden, dass ihre Staette sie nicht mehr kennt. Sie haette das Erbe der Reformation von sich geworfen.*"¹⁵⁾ And this earnest testimony, following that of Dr. Walther and taken up by thousands of others, has resulted in producing this condition of affairs that the faintest denial, or implication of a denial, of the *sola gratia* or the *gratia universalis* in our circles would at once arouse a storm of shocked protest throughout the borders of the Missouri Synod and the Synodical Conference, and all the resources of the Church, patient instruction, earnest admonition, and fervent appeal, would be applied, anxiously and unceasingly, till the offense would be removed. We as a Church have been trained to treasure and guard the Gospel of grace.

He stood as a faithful witness and withstood the temptation which comes upon every theologian, the urge to shade this article sufficiently to make it acceptable to carnal reason. Carnal reason declares you must either sacrifice universal grace in order to maintain sole grace or give us the *sola gratia* in the interest of the *gratia universalis*. It would seem so. But Scripture denies the alternative. Scripture teaches both. And the theology of grace calls for Biblical thinking. Thank God that our teacher was endowed with Biblical thinking and unhesitatingly applied the principle which Dr. Walther, who followed the Formula of Concord, which followed Luther, who followed St. Paul, enunciated in these words: "This is the Lutheran way: when we find two statements in Scripture which we cannot harmonize, we accept both at full value and believe both just as they stand."¹⁶⁾

Thus Dr. Pieper gazed into the full glory of the Gospel of grace — and how he loved it! He lived for it. He labored for it. What labor, what loving care, he expended on every treatise, every

15) *Atlantic Dist.*, 9, 29. 34.

16) *Lehre und Wehre*, 36, 50.

chapter, he wrote in this matter! How closely he examined every sentence, every phrase, every word, and carefully weighed them for days and weeks before he would give utterance to them lest any uncertainty should anywhere be created regarding either the *gratia universalis* or the *sola gratia*! The Gospel of grace must be kept inviolate to the Church and the dying world.

He loved it and held every man in the highest esteem who confessed it. We know how he looked up to, and admired and loved, his teacher Dr. Walther. And what lay at the bottom of it? He says: "We think we are not saying too much when we state that after Luther and Chemnitz perhaps no teacher of our Church has presented the doctrine of justification so vividly and forcefully as Walther."¹⁷ And wherever in the Church a voice was raised, be it ever so faintly, for the Gospel of grace, his ear was attuned to hear it, and he added his own voice to give it volume. And when there was a pronounced Lutheran ring to it, how his heart leaped for joy! When a Lutheran churchman of America declared at the Lutheran World Convention of 1929: "By grace alone" — that is the heart of Lutheranism," and unfolded this thesis over against both synergism and Calvinism, Dr. Pieper had the entire paper republished in the CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY and uttered the wish: "May the Lutheran Church of America and of the world give this essay full consideration!"¹⁸ He loved the chief article of Christianity and did all that lay in his power to have it universally studied, accepted, and cherished.

His faithful testimony has borne much fruit. A theologian of the American Lutheran Church expresses it thus: "It must certainly be credited to him and Walther that the *sola gratia*, from which the Lutheran Church ever drew her sustenance and which she always proclaimed, attained more and more definitely, also in its theological presentation, its full meaning and force in the Lutheran Church of this country and that clear and clean theological thinking was promoted."¹⁹ Christian theology owes much to Dr. Pieper. And they owe him a debt of eternal gratitude who to-day, because of his and his pupils' ministry, are kneeling before the Throne of Grace and praying: "But though my sins are black as night, I dare to come before Thy sight Because I trust Thy Son. In Him alone my trust I place, Come boldly to Thy throne of grace, And there commune with Thee. Salvation sure, O Lord, is mine, And, all unworthy, I am Thine, For Jesus died for me."

How shall we deal with the precious heritage Dr. Pieper has passed on to us? A great trust has been committed to us. God is holding us accountable for our administration of it. At the dedica-

17) *Lehre und Wehre*, 36, 10. 19) *Kirchl. Zeitschrift*, 1931, p. 433.

18) *CON. THEOL. MTHLY.*, 1, 338.

tion of Concordia Seminary in 1882 Dr. Walther spoke the burning words: "May the mouth of that teacher who shall at any time utter one word in our new Concordia against Christ's free grace and against His alone true Word be smitten by God and stopped forever!"²⁰⁾ Dr. Pieper and his colleagues were faithful to their trust. Concordia Seminary, by the grace of God, through the ministry of Dr. Pieper and his colleagues stands to-day as of yore for the free and universal, the alone-saving grace of God. And we, seeing how God has dealt with us, cannot do other than raise our right hands to heaven and take the solemn vow: Let my right hand forget her cunning if I fail thee, O Jerusalem! Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I withhold from thee one word of the Gospel of grace! God helping us, we shall keep the vow. The prayer with which our sainted teacher closed his essay at the Delegate Synod of 1926 must be our prayer: "Dear Savior Jesus Christ, graciously grant us that we may never betray the alone-saving Christian doctrine of grace, but remain faithful confessors of it for the honor of Thy holy name and the salvation of man! Amen."²¹⁾ TH. ENGELDER.

Reich Gottes, Kirche, Gemeinde, Synode.

Um den Begriff der christlichen Lehre, des *corpus doctrinae*, recht zu veranschaulichen, hat man sich schon von jeher verschiedener Bilder bedient. Man hat die Summa der Lehren einem Gebäude verglichen, worin die verschiedenen Teile, Fundament, Wände, Dach usw., den verschiedenen Fundamental- und Nichtfundamentallehren, den mehr oder weniger wichtigen Teilen der biblischen Wahrheit, entsprechen. Oder man hat geredet von einer Kette, in der die einzelnen Lehren die Glieder sind. Hin und wieder findet sich auch wohl der Vergleich von einem Baum, der mit seinen Wurzeln im Boden des Wortes Gottes steht, dessen Stamm die Lehre von Christo und der Rechtfertigung allein aus Gnaden ist und dessen Krone und Früchte die übrigen Lehren des *corpus doctrinae* sind. Oder man hat geredet von einem Türbogen, dessen Grundlage die Schrift ist, dessen einzelne Steine die Lehren der Schrift sind und dessen Schlussstein die Lehre von der Rechtfertigung ist.

Der letzte Vergleich ist in mehr als einer Hinsicht besonders passend. Für den gläubigen Theologen ist selbstverständlich die Schrift die eine Grundlage aller Lehren, die in der Kirche vorgetragen werden, sei es vom Lehrstuhl, sei es von der Kanzel aus. Die einzelnen Lehren der Schrift sind aufs innigste miteinander verbunden und stützen einander. Nimmt man auch nur eine aus dem Zusammenhange des Lehrkörpers heraus, so kommt der ganze Bogen, resp. das ganze Gebäude, dem er

20) *Lutheraner*, 79, 372.

21) *Lehre und Wehre*, 72, 329.