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Sola Gratia

BY J. W. BEHNKEN

The *Lutherische Woche* of the Lutheran World Federation sponsored several meetings for the host of visitors at Hannover during the L. W. F. convention. In one of these meetings three short addresses were delivered on the three principles of the Lutheran Reformation and were closely listened to by several thousand. *Kreisdekan Schieder* of Nuernberg spoke on *Sola Scriptura*, Dr. J. W. Behnken of Missouri Synod on *Sola Gratia*, and Bishop Bo Giertz of Sweden on *Sola Fide*. Dr. Behnken's address is here given in full in a translation prepared by himself.

To speak on the very important topic "*Sola Gratia*" within a period of fifteen minutes, and to do this within the framework of the highly significant general theme: "The Gospel establishes and maintains our Lutheran Church," is an assignment to which I cannot even remotely do justice. At best I can refer only to a few major points. We are concerned here with the chief principle of the Reformation. Dr. Luther declared: "The word of grace and forgiveness of sin teaches us that we are justified and saved solely through Christ, without our merit; this is the principal article from which all our doctrine flowed."

If we desire to derive full benefit from the consideration of this theme, we must first of all address ourselves to the question: What is grace? A brief but striking and Scriptural definition reads: "Grace is the unmerited favor or love of God in Christ for us poor sinners." Grace is not something within man, but is found in God's heart. It is God's loving attitude toward us poor sinners. When God remembers the sinner, condemned to damnation, with eternal salvation, that is grace.

Such grace cannot possibly be a mere declaration of God whereby He willy-nilly pronounces the poor sinner free from his guilt. It is altogether contrary to Scripture that a person may be freed from the horrible debt of sin without full payment of the debt. But the poor sinner could not pay it. God's Word declares: "None of them can by any means redeem his brother nor give to God a ransom for him; for the redemption of their soul is precious, and it ceaseth forever." But the grace of God found a way. Even before the foundations of the world were laid, the Triune God adopted the plan that the eternal Son of God should become man, assume man's guilt, and by His vicarious payment of the debt of sin free the helpless sinner from this debt. In the fullness of the time Christ actually did this. Hence the Apostle writes: "In whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace."

This wonderful grace was the only motive that prompted our redemption. No one can understand or explain God's action in giving His only-begotten Son into the horrible suffering and death and the action of the Son in sacrificing Himself on the accursed tree of the Cross unless he understands what grace is, and that this grace of God alone prompted and motivated Him to do what He did.

This grace of God is also the only motive for the forgiveness of our sins. Nothing within man can move God to forgive his sins. Man's sin merits only punishment, yes, eternal damnation. If we miserable sinners, who have deserved only God's wrath and displeasure, temporal death and eternal punishment, are nevertheless to receive and enjoy forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation, it is possible only by God's grace and mercy.

Thank God! There is an abundance of this grace. By His dreadful suffering and by His bitter death on the Cross Christ rendered it possible for God to bestow His full grace on us sinners. God gave us Christ, and in Christ He gives us everything.

Our heart should leap for joy when we hear furthermore that this grace is universal. Christ earned it for all men. The Word of God declares: "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself." Furthermore: "He is the Propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world."

This wondrous grace is transmitted to us by the means of grace, i. e., the Word and Sacraments. In full accord with Holy Writ, and in contrast to the doctrine of the Reformed, our Lutheran Confessions emphasize the doctrine of the means of grace. The Apostle writes to the Romans: "So, then, faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God." To the Ephesians he writes concerning the Gentiles that they "should be . . . of the same body . . . by the Gospel." The Apostle St. James writes: "Of His own will begat He us with the Word of truth." Concerning the water in Baptism God says: "The like figure whereunto even Baptism doth also now save us." Furthermore He says of the Church that Christ "gave Himself for it, that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the Word." — Of Holy Communion Christ says expressly: "Given and shed for you for the remission of sins."

The Word in the means of grace is not an empty declaration, but the creative, omnipotent Word. God places the entire Gospel into the one word "grace," grace alone, for, as Luther says, grace is always grace alone. Through this Word God works faith. The Lord says: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves;

it is the gift of God; not of works, lest any man should boast." Despite these clear statements of God, some, even in the Lutheran Church, have sought to make the conduct of man the determining factor in his conversion. The Word of God knows of no conversion which depends on any co-operation of man, not even the slightest co-operation. In all actions of God which purpose our salvation — our election, conversion, justification, sanctification, and the final consummation — Scripture knows only grace, grace alone.

From what has been said it is clearly discernible that every merit of man is excluded altogether. Grace and merit are absolute opposites. Scripture says: "And if by grace, then it is no more of works, otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then it is no more grace, otherwise work is no more work."

Thank God for this irrefutable truth, "grace alone!" Resting on this foundation, the certainty of our salvation cannot be overthrown. "Grace alone" is the true Gospel, and that is "the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth."

"Grace alone" is the pulse-beat of the Christian Church. Hence we must defend this doctrine to the utmost, under no condition surrender it, and not alter even the slightest part of it. The life of the Church, especially of our dear Lutheran Church, depends on it. Whoever attacks "by grace alone" has seized us at the throat and seeks to strangle us. On the other hand, whoever clings to this doctrine and always sounds forth a clear and unmistakable note renders the greatest service to the Christian Church. By this divine and omnipotent word "grace alone," and only by "grace alone," God builds and preserves His Church. What wonderful comfort and what strengthening encouragement for us in this evil day! In this Lutheran slogan we have the power of God which revives us again and again, the mighty weapon against all our enemies, the powerful means by which God transforms poor sinners into children of God, delivers helpless subjects out of the power of darkness, and translates them into the kingdom of His dear Son, out of poor miserable human beings builds and preserves Christian congregations which are active in works of love, and finally will transform the Church Militant into the Church Triumphant.

May God preserve for us the precious heritage of the Reformation: "Grace alone!"