

What We Believe

The Grace of God

The thread that runs throughout the Scriptures and gives unity to all the books is God's grace. While God is Holy, just, all-powerful, all-knowing and the sovereign ruler of the universe, the attribute that God's Word emphasizes primarily from Genesis to Revelation is his grace. God's grace is clearly depicted and easy to observe in the New Testament, which records the ministry, suffering, death, resurrection and the ascension of Jesus. Also in the Old Testament the grace of God is the underlying theme. Already in the early chapters of Genesis we see a recurring cycle of sin, judgment and grace. After the fall of Adam and Eve into sin and God's judgment on them and on the human race, Yahweh promises his grace in Genesis 3:15: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."

The cycle is repeated in the following chapter. When Cain kills his brother Abel, the Lord pronounces judgment banishing Cain—but he immediately shows his grace by placing a protective mark on Cain. The third cycle occurs in Genesis 6-9. The sins of the people cause God to impose judgment by sending a flood. However, he also graciously preserves Noah and his family. Later, when Noah's descendants sin and attempt to build a tower to heaven, God's judgment results in the confusion of their speech and in scattering them far and wide. His grace is shown in the calling of Abraham, whose descendants would be God's chosen people and the forebears of the promised Messiah (Genesis 11-12).

Throughout the rest of the Old Testament God's grace follows sin and judgment – both in the lives of the leaders and in the history of the nation of Israel. Whether in the case of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, or in the careers of the kings, such as David and Solomon, Scripture candidly reveals their sin and God's judgment – but his grace follows immediately. Also in the history of the Jewish people, sin (particularly their idolatry and general rebellion) produces judgment (e.g., the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities), but the grace of God restores them as a nation.

God's grace, as the primary key to the intricacies of the Old Testament, is revealed especially in the promise of final deliverance through a Messiah. This future Savior is described particularly in two different settings. Daniel depicts him as "one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven... He was given authority, glory and sovereign power... his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed" (9:13-14). Isaiah, on the other hand, pictures the Messiah as a suffering servant (ch. 53). These contrasting depictions led some Jews at the time of Jesus to expect two separate Messiahs – for these passages seem to be contradictory. It is through the additional illumination in the New Testament that the apparent discrepancy is solved in the person of Jesus Christ, who is both a suffering servant and the resurrected Lord of the church. As the promises and the description of the Messiah are more vague in the Old Testament, so the grace of God in the Old Testament may not be clear as it is in the New Testament. Nevertheless, it is the theme that unites all the books of the Bible into a unified whole.

Through Faith Alone

The grace of God involves another principal teaching—"through faith alone." It is through faith that believers receive the benefit of God's grace as St. Paul states in Ephesians: "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” (2:8-9). Paul elaborates on the contrast between “through faith” and “by works” in his letters to the Romans and to the Galatians. It is truth that cannot be over emphasized, for it clarifies the essence of God’s grace. Without the specific stress on “through faith” and “not by works,” the grace of God stands in danger of becoming merely a diluted form of favor rather than genuine grace.

Human beings are strongly inclined by nature to take at least some credit for any attainments. Even Christians, who are still infected with their natural ego, are prone to view their salvation as the result of some contribution on their part. They are tempted to view their faith as an act they can perform of themselves, as if their acceptance of the gospel message were an achievement to their credit. Both in Galatians and in Romans Paul stresses this point as he summarizes it in the passage cited from Ephesians: “[faith] is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.”

Virtually all non-Christian religions teach a form of work righteousness (synergism) as a means of gaining the favor of supreme being(s). It is a notion that also infiltrates the Christian church when it is implied that salvation, at least in part, depends on us, if only on our decision. But Scripture teaches that salvation is the result of God’s grace, appropriated only through faith, which is a gift from God. This teaching is unique to Christianity; it is the basic premise of God’s Word and is essential to the understanding of the gospel.

Scripture Alone

Another principal teaching, which is a corollary to the previous themes, is that Scripture is the sole source of doctrine and practice. Although the ability to reason, which is also a gift from God, distinguishes human beings from animals, it is not to be regarded as the criterion by which questions of a religious nature are answered. Where paradoxes occur, a childlike faith must prevail over logical deductions. Scripture takes precedence over reason. This means that when, for example, God’s Word teaches a triune Deity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—we bow to Biblical revelation, even though such a teaching is beyond the understanding of our human mind. The same is true when the Scriptures speak of the virgin birth of Jesus, of his twofold nature (God and man), of his resurrection and ascension, of the partaking in his body and blood in the Lord’s Supper. All these teachings we believe because they are stated in Scripture, although they are beyond mortal comprehension.

Scripture must be the sole source of doctrine and practice because God’s written Word is in a class by itself, completely different from all other books. “All Scripture is God-breathed [inspired]” (2Ti 3:16) and “...men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2Pe 1:21). God is the author of all Scripture. Through the Holy Spirit he directed the thoughts and very words that the various human writers from Moses to John wrote, while employing their style and thought processes. It is the inspired, God-breathed Scripture from which all Christian doctrine and admonition must be derived, for Paul continues the passage just cited by declaring that all Scripture is to be used “for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in the righteousness” (2Ti 3:16).

The teaching that Scripture alone, not reason, must be the only and final judge of doctrine may be illustrated by the answers to the questions concerning the source of salvation and the source of damnation. Two answers have been given throughout the history of Christian thought—each logical according to our natural powers of reasoning. One reply is that man himself is finally responsible for his salvation or

damnation, depending on what he does or fails to do—including both his deeds and his personal decision. The other answer is that God is the ultimate source, depending on whether he has elected and predestined people to salvation or damnation. According to rules of logic, each set of answers is reasonable and there is no third alternative. But according to Scripture there is another reply to the query; namely, that God is the source of salvation (Eph 2:8-9) and man is responsible for damnation (Mt 23:37). So regardless of what your reason would dictate we must answer theological question on the basis of Scripture alone, which paradoxically teaches concerning salvation: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith” (Eph 2:8) and concerning damnation: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem...how often have I longed to gather your children together...but you were not willing” (Mt 23:37).

Law and Gospel

The alternatives of damnation and salvation suggest another principal teaching derived from Holy Writ—law and gospel. A popular way to express the difference between these terms is by the letters SOS. Thus the law “Shows Our Sins,” while the gospel “Shows Our Savior.”

The entire Bible contains both law and gospel, the Old Testament as well as the New. It is frequently assumed that the Old Testament is law and the New Testament is gospel. However, as we have pointed out previously, the Old Testament also presents the grace of God, which is gospel; and the New Testament contains law as well as gospel.

Any serious study of the Scriptures must recognize both law and gospel and must distinguish between them. To omit either one or to confuse the two invites misunderstanding of Christian doctrine. Preaching the atoning ministry, death resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ without first proclaiming the sinfulness of the human race is an exercise in folly. The gospel must be preceded by a proclamation of law, which shows the hearers their need for a Savior, who has released them from guilt and punishment of their sinfulness. Preaching the gospel apart from the law results in a diluted, shallow, emotional message. Likewise, to proclaim the law without the comforting truth of the gospel can offer no assurance to a troubled conscience.

However, mingling law and gospel, or assigning the function of one to the other, is equally dangerous. Statements such as, “You are saved because you believe” are a mixing of law and gospel, for the words “if” and “because” imply conditions and contributions in addition to God’s grace. The grace of God is complete and unconditional. Our salvation is fully achieved by the suffering, death and resurrection of God’s one and only Son, Jesus Christ. It does not depend on anything we do or have done—or any “if” or “because” on our part. To mix law and gospel is to pervert and destroy the sweet message of God’s grace. Our faith is not our contribution or our work; it is a gift of God through the work of the Holy Spirit.

It is also important to distinguish between law and gospel concerning the source of salvation and damnation. According to Ephesians 1, our salvation is the result of our election by God from eternity, which is the gospel message. To deduce by logical reasoning that therefore some people must be predestined to damnation is law—a clear instance of mingling law and gospel. On the other hand, the “unreasonable” doctrine of election to salvation (but not to damnation) is a particularly comforting part of the gospel message. When Christians ponder their spiritual situation, especially in their later years of life, and wonder whether they will remain in faith at the hour of death, the Biblical teaching on election offers

reliable assurance. If faith were their own accomplishment, fear that faith might fall before death would present some cause for doubt and alarm. But thanks to our election to salvation from eternity by God's grace, our faith is a gift of God, the result of God's choice, and is sustained by his Holy Spirit through Word and sacrament. Therefore Christians can be assured with Paul: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? ...For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels or demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Ro 8:35,38-39).

By the grace of God! Through faith, the gift of God! The question now arises, "What are the means by which we receive the benefits of God's grace and the gift of faith?" Scripture, our sole source of doctrine, gives the answer. St. Paul states: "Faith comes...through the word of Christ" (Ro 10:17; cf. Eph 6:17)—God's Word is one of the means by which the Holy Spirit works faith in the hearts of believers. The same apostle declares in reference to baptism: "But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life" (Tit 3:4-7). Likewise concerning Holy Communion Paul makes it clear that it is more than a symbol; it is a means of grace: "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?" (1Co 10:16).

We must not undervalue the function of the Spirit. There are three articles in the Apostles' Creed. In the first we confess the Father's creation and preservation of the physical universe and his provision for our bodily needs. The second article describes what the Son has done *for* us. The third article is equally important, for it expresses what the Holy Spirit does *in* us.

Scripture presents the following statements about baptism. First, infants need to be redeemed from their inherited state of sinfulness. The Bible says: "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me" (Ps 51:5). Second, no individual (of any age) has a free will in spiritual matters, including the ability to make the decision to come to faith. St. Paul clearly states that by nature, "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God" (Ro 3:10-11). Third, the faith both of an adult and of a child is the gift of God (Eph 2:8-9), the work of the Holy Spirit, who accomplishes it through the means of grace. God's Word and the sacraments are obviously more than mere symbols.

That God's Word and his sacraments are the means by which believers receive the grace of God through faith, the gift of God, is a teaching that is intertwined with the other principal doctrines discussed previously. It is absolutely essential, therefore, to recognize the Word of God and the sacraments as the means of grace through which the Holy Spirit functions in the life of the church and the individual Christian.

Christology

A central teaching of Christianity, implied in all the doctrines we have discussed—God's grace, faith alone, Scripture alone, law and gospel, the sacraments—is Christology, which concerns the person and work of Jesus Christ. John succinctly summarizes the gospel message: "For God so loved the world

that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16).

The person of Jesus is unique in that he is both fully divine and completely human. “In the beginning was the Word (Jesus), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (Jn 1:1). His divine nature took on human nature: “But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons” Gal 4:4-5). “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (Jn 1:14). Jesus always has been and always will be true God. When he was conceived through the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary, he became also true man (incarnation), which is still and always will be.

The time from his conception to the moment before he returned to life in the sealed tomb we call his state humiliation. During this period Jesus humbled himself and did not always use his divine power and qualities (attributes), although he did not cease to be God (Php 2:5-11). The time from his descent to hell and his resurrection throughout eternity we term his state of exaltation. During this period our resurrected Lord has always been and is now present everywhere (omnipresent)—also according to his human nature—making full use of his divine powers and attributes (Mt 28: 18-20; Eph 1:19-23).

The Apostle’s Creed, which millions of Christians confess every week (if not every day), mentions the specific events in both Jesus’ humiliation and his exaltation. His humiliation includes: (1) “was conceived by the Holy Spirit” (Lk 1: 35); (2) “born of the virgin Mary” (Mt 1:23); (3) “suffered under Pontius Pilate” (Jn 18:28-19:16); (4) “was crucified” (Jn 19:18); (5) “died and was buried” (Jn 19:30, 41-42). Then follow the events of Jesus’ exaltation: (1) “he descended into hell” (1 Pr 3:19-20—not to suffer or to offer deceased souls a second chance, but to proclaim his lordship); (2) “the third day he rose again from the dead” (Mt 28:1-10); (3) “he ascended into heaven” (Lk 24:50-51); (4) “and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty” (Eph 1:19-20); (5) “from thence he will come to judge the living and the dead” (Mt 25:31-46; Jn 5:28-29; Ac 1:11; 1 Th 4:13-18).

As the one and only Son of God, who is fully divine and at the same time completely human (but without sin), Jesus is the Mediator between God and the human race. He lived the perfectly obedient life that human beings cannot attain, fulfilling God’s law for us (active obedience, 2 Co 5:21; Gal 4:4-5). He suffered what sinful mankind deserves to suffer, surrendering to death on the cross and paying the penalty for the sins of the world (passive obedience), and overcame death by rising from the grave (Jn 10:15; 1 Jn 3:8; 1 Co 15:51-57). The benefit of Jesus’ accomplishments is available to all people by the grace of God; it is received by believers through faith, which is the gift of God through the work of the Holy Spirit, who functions through God’s Word and the sacraments (the means of grace, Eph 2:8-9).

The ministry of Jesus, therefore, fulfills three roles: Prophet, Priest, and King. As Moses proclaimed the will of God, led Israel out of bondage and was the person through whom God made a covenant at Sinai, so our Savior as Prophet proclaimed the message of his heavenly Father, announcing the rescue of mankind from bondage to sin, Satan and death, and established a new covenant between God and man, validated in the shedding of his blood on the cross (Ex 24:1-11; Jer 31:31-34; Heb 8:6-12; Mk 14:22-25).

In the Old Testament the priest offered specified sacrifices as mediator between God and man. Jesus in the role of Priest became Mediator between God and the human beings by offering himself as

“the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29, 36; He 9:11-14). As Priest, furthermore, the resurrected Christ brings the needs and prayers of his people to the throne of his Father and serves them through his Word and sacraments (Ro 8:34; Mt 28:19-20; 2Ti 3:16; Tit 3:4-6).

To describe Jesus’ authority in the universe, Scripture frequently refers to him as King (Jn 18:33-19:22), with a threefold kingdom. In his kingdom of power he rules the entire universe (Eph 1:20-21); in his kingdom of grace he reigns over his church (Eph 1: 22); in his kingdom of glory he rules heaven and the world to come (Col 1:15-20). Such is the person and work of our Savior, who experienced temptation, loneliness, fatigue, misunderstanding, mockery and death—all of our sake. As his children we may approach with confidence the heavenly throne of our Lord, who is able to sympathize with our weakness and who will grant us mercy and grace in our time of need (Heb 4:14-16).