

## Why Not Grace Alone? by Pastor Marty

In January, I discussed how the concept of Prima Scriptura, Scripture as primary, might be a better way of deciding our Christian theology than Sola Scriptura, Scripture alone. I suggested this idea based on the obvious extremes that lead to incorrect theology by those who ignore the very passages of Scripture that warn against exegesis in isolation. Of course, the reformers never intended that we would have believers developing major doctrines outside the context of the larger Body of Christ, but it has become more common than they ever expected. Last month, I continued the series by suggesting that the concept of Prima Fide, faith as primary, might be better integrated into a true biblical theology than Sola Fide, faith alone. As discussed at that time, the only place in Scripture where “faith alone” is ever actually mentioned is in the book of James where he states that “we are not saved by faith alone” but must have works accompanying our faith to make it alive. It is important to recognize that while we have the scripture that says Abraham was justified by faith and not by works, we also have a verse that states that it was faith with his works that justified him—not faith alone. These may seem to contradict each other until we recognize that the former indicates that justification is not by works without faith while the latter declares that justification is not by faith without works; both are necessary. This helps to bring clarity to the reason the psalmist declares that righteousness was credited to Phinehas for all generations because of what he did: his works were born out of faith. Faith is primary in our orthodoxy and orthopraxy, but it is not sufficient when it is unaccompanied by those works that Jesus calls fruit.

***Faith is primary in the Christian life, but it is insufficient when there are no works.***

The next Sola I want to discuss is *Sola Gratia*, the concept of “Grace Alone” for salvation. This is a doctrine that rejects the idea that people can do perfectly good works, including choosing to live for God, solely on their own abilities and entirely apart from grace. It goes back to the time of Pelagius in the 4<sup>th</sup> century; he believed people were not born with original sin, so they could potentially live out a sinless life without any special grace from God. He and Augustine had severe disagreements over this concept, and the Church sided with Augustine. Augustine, whose theology became the basis for most of the Protestant Reformation, argued that mankind cannot do anything remotely good without God both initiating and undergirding it with His gift of grace. In reaction, Pelagius argued that Augustine was actually returning to his Manichean roots, which related sinfulness to having a physical body. The reformers embraced Augustine’s theology, but they perhaps did so with a slight detriment to their own commitment to the Bible, for some of what has arisen from their position has deviated from Scripture. There are aspects of our concept of *Sola Gratia* that have not only begun to erode our understanding of the nature of God as displayed in the Bible but also to minimize the *imago Dei* in us, His creation.

***Our view of “grace alone” has begun undermining our view of both His and our nature.***

There are extremes we must avoid if we are going for a truly biblical understanding of grace. If we accept Pelagius’ original view, we believe grace helps us but is not necessary for living a perfect life. This perspective simply does not fit with Christian orthodoxy or orthopraxy—correct belief or practice. Paul says very clearly in his letter to the church at Rome that nobody—not even one person—can do good or live righteously apart from God’s grace. It simply is not possible. Human nature is infected with sin, and our sinful nature affects everything we do, say, and think. However, we must also beware of a tendency to go to the other extreme, claiming there is nothing remotely good in anything that does not

have some type of special anointing by God. As human beings made in God's image, we still have some of that image reflecting in and through us—as poor and broken as that reflection may be. Though Paul states that nothing entirely good exists in any of us apart from God, that isn't the same as saying we are entirely evil. There are too many scriptural passages describing the positive intentions and works of certain unsaved people for that perspective to fit. Rahab, Ruth, and the Syrophenician woman are examples of people outside the congregation of God's chosen people who received God's favor. In all of these cases, a person "from the outside" acted in a way that received a positive response from God.

***Rahab, Ruth, and the Syrophenician woman received favor in response to their acts.***

An important distinction must be made in these cases: these women did not suddenly become part of God's people due to being righteous or deserving on their own; on the contrary, they asked for grace and received it. Of course, some may argue that they only sought God because God had called to them first. That may be true, but that argument is not supported by anything in those passages, so any "argument from silence" must be supported by clear scriptures in other places. In these instances, they all had a desire that drew them to God or His representatives, and they received favor and blessing. If we believe that nobody can ever have even the remotest positive desire or intention unless God causes it, we must accept that we are basing our beliefs upon a doctrine that is not actually stated in the Bible. Of course, that does not necessarily mean it is wrong, for the Trinity is not stated with specific wording and definition in Scripture, but there is sufficient mention and reference to affirm it. However, if we do build doctrines upon other doctrines, we need to be careful we are not deviating from the Bible itself.

***If we build doctrines on other doctrines, we can end up deviating from Scripture itself.***

The extremes of the argument between Pelagius and Augustine are clearly visible in the current doctrinal extremes of free will and predestination. On one extreme, free will is so sacrosanct that some believe that God Himself does not know the future; on the other extreme, destiny overrides all other things to the point that some people are forced to reject God for eternity. There are more than enough scriptures to refute the extremes on both sides, but that is not the focus of this newsletter. Instead, it is important to recognize how grace fits into the equation. Commonly, the extreme Calvinist view says that *Sola Gratia*, Grace Alone, tells us that nothing a person does—before or after salvation—has any effect on personal salvation. This doesn't sound problematic until we also realize that it is described as being irresistible. In other words, the person cannot refuse to accept this grace and be saved. When this is put together with predestination, the result is the negation of any free will at all: God decides all things beforehand, and people are led through life with no actual choice except to be happy with their fate. The problem with this view is that it is built on a narrow interpretation of some scripture passages while completely ignoring a host of others. If grace is all that matters, some scriptures must be ignored.

***If grace is all that matters, then some scripture passages have to be completely ignored.***

I want to suggest that it is much more biblical and in line with the revealed good news in both the Old and the New Testaments to view salvation in terms of *Prima Gratia*, Grace as Primary, instead of *Sola Gratia*, Grace Alone. As a single example out of many possibilities, I want to discuss Abraham. As we know, Abram (as he was first called) came from Ur of the Chaldeans. He came from a family that worshipped idols in a culture that worshipped idols; there is evidence that he himself worshipped idols before his encounter with the Living God. In Genesis, the book of beginnings, we see that God calls him to leave his family and nation in order to become something unique—a brand new nation founded on the worship of the One True God alone. God makes it clear to Abram that he is to worship and follow

Him alone. Abram obeys, and the rest of the book deals with him and his family. As we read all of those chapters, we see that both destiny and choice are presented as true, and neither one takes precedence over the other: on the one hand, God declares Abram will have a child, his descendants will be slaves in Egypt for 400 years, and God would bring them out with judgment; on the other hand, God repeatedly uses conditional language to indicate that “if” Abram obeys, “then” God would reward him, “because” he believed in Him. God Himself describes the extent that choice was a major part of the covenant.

***God Himself describes the extent that choice plays into His covenant with Abraham.***

In *The Silver Chair*, C. S. Lewis suggests that we call out to God *because* He has already called us: “You would not have called to me unless I had been calling to you.” Nothing in the Bible contradicts the idea that positive actions on our part are initiated by the Holy Spirit moving on our hearts and minds. However, if we discount the value of our responses to God’s call, we will be forced to reinterpret many scriptures to mean something different than they were intended to mean. Just as the liberal theology of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century attempted to demythologize the Bible and explain away all miracles, the devaluation of our actions and responses will actually change the meaning of the good news: that God values us so much that He has done everything to bring us back into relationship with Him. There is no discrepancy between affirming that God actually values our choices and rejecting the idea that we earn God’s love and favor. Jesus blessed the Centaurian with the sick servant, the woman with the issue of blood, and the blind beggar Bartimaeus precisely *because* they refused to take “no” for an answer; they acted and pushed their way into His attention and received a reward for their faith. If faith means believing God rewards those who seek Him, then both the reward and the search must have value.

***If faith is believing God rewards those who seek Him, then seeking must have value.***

The concept of *Prima Gratia* suggests that as much as we rely upon the primacy of God’s grace, we should not discount that our choices and intentions have value to Him. God responds with favor to those who seek Him, making our actions worthwhile. If we focus on grace as God’s “undeserved” favor, we may find ourselves unintentionally—or even intentionally for some—discounting that God actually takes pleasure in things that we do through honor, obedience, and worship. When we do that, we will find ourselves diminishing the very things that God treasures. If Jesus rejoiced greatly when the twelve returned from “doing the works” He commanded them to do, then we should take joy in them as well. The idea that obedience and faith do not touch God actually minimizes the stigma of disobedience and sin because then all of our actions become indistinguishable. Throughout both the Old and the New Testaments, we have instances of people who respond when God calls them to something, and they receive a reward for their obedience or—such as is the case with Saul, Jonah, or Ananias—a rebuke for disobedience. However, we also have a significant number of accounts of people who turn to God and seek Him seemingly out of the blue and receive a blessing from God. Clearly, God honored their choice.

***The Bible records numerous accounts of God honoring those who act out of faith.***

If we make God’s grace irresistible and our actions meaningless to God, we negate a plethora of scriptures that call us to follow God from a sincere heart. If we try to interpret God as unemotionally affected by our service and our worship, we begin to define Him in terms of “Ultimate Reason” and to embrace the same Greek philosophy that birthed Gnosticism. Every verse in the Bible that mentions God taking joy in our worship, obedience, and faith loses its meaning if we decide that He does not find any value in them. God’s grace certainly calls and empowers us, but we should not conclude that He is not actually moved by our responses. What we do matters to God, and He honors our devotion to Him.