

THE SOLAS OF THE REFORMATION

i. Grace Alone

Ephesians 2:1-10, Titus 2:11-14

John Newton in his hymn reminds us that grace is truly 'amazing'. Yet all too often grace has become such a familiar term that we lose the amazing nature of that wonderful truth. So, with God's help, let us attempt to put 'amazing' back into grace. Grace is not simply a theological concept. It is not just an idea about God. Grace is all about the person and work of Jesus. Grace is Jesus personified. Throughout the Old Testament grace and sacrifice go hand in glove. A blood sacrifice of an animal was the substitute for the sins of the Israelites. In themselves they were not sufficient for the full forgiveness of sins, needing to be repeated time and again; thereby pointing to the coming of Christ.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer rightly distinguished cheap grace from costly grace: "Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of the church. We are fighting today 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." Bonhoeffer followed the legacy of Martin Luther, who in turn relied on the great North African saint, Augustine. It has been well noted by B.B. Warfield that, "The Reformation, inwardly considered, was just the ultimate triumph of Augustine's doctrine of grace over Augustine's doctrine of the church". The story of grace is not limited to the pages of Scripture. It has radical, indeed revolutionary, implications for how we see God, the nature of sin and our own sense of identity and future.

Augustine was dealing with a context in which Christianity was no longer a persecuted beleaguered minority on the margins of society. With the conversion of the Emperor Constantine, Christianity became respectable, the social religion of the day. The bureaucracy of state and church became inextricably linked. It became 'easy' to follow Christ, where Christianity had won the battle for the hearts and minds of the empire's inhabitants. Ironically the reverse is happening in the west today. An Enlightenment world view debunked supernatural faith in the interests of human autonomy. And now, our so-called postmodern world has reduced Truth with a capital T to truths of personal and societal creation. Accordingly, Augustine has something important to say about the nature of grace today. He used a unique form of theological reflection in his *Confessions*.

Augustine reminds us that the human heart left to itself is 'restless'. A restless heart out of kilter with God is the reason why we commit sin. He reflects on two incidents, one from his youth, and one from his friend Alypius. He and friends steal some pears from a neighbour's tree. They were not particularly nice pears. However, it was the act of independence and autonomous defiance which was appealing. Augustine saw the antidote to sin as not mere morality or trying harder, rather a new heart, a gift of grace to replace the empty ache of a restless heart. The second incident was his friend Alypius going reluctantly to the Arena to watch the gladiator games. He was determined to close his eyes to the blood-lust and block his ears to the baying of the crowd. Caught up in the moment he couldn't resist looking and listening. And what he heard and saw changed him irrevocably. He was a different person from the one who entered the arena. Exposure to gratuitous violence changed the way his brain worked. Augustine intuitively observed what physiology tells us today. The neural pathways of the brain can be changed for good or bad by exposure to external stimuli. Learning to play a musical instrument or mastering a foreign language wires the brain positively. Conversely exposure to excessive violence or access to pornography

on the world wide web, alters the way the brain operates in an extremely damaging way. The solution to such addiction is not like Alypius to close our eyes and block our ears, rather to experiencing the intervention of grace. God must first change us before we can change ourselves. Even our ability to respond in faith is a gift of grace. We need more than the common grace of God in creation. We need the saving grace of God in Christ.

Fast forward a thousand years from Augustine. A student is caught in a vicious thunderstorm. He prays to St Anne the patroness of miners to rescue him, whereupon he enters an Augustinian monastery against his father's wishes who wanted him to become a lawyer. The young Martin Luther in order to save his soul becomes a monk. However, Luther's restless heart never found peace until it was arrested by grace, the heart of God. As we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, the debate was more than about indulgencies and the power of the papacy. Responding to the humanist Renaissance scholar Erasmus, who wrote a Diatribe on *Human Freedom*, Luther wrote perhaps his most significant work *The Bondage of the Will*. Unless God in his grace gives us a new heart in Christ, the addictive nature of sin enslaves the human will. The only way in which we can change is when we discover, or re-discover, the revolutionary nature of grace, personified in Christ. Grace is Christ laying down his life, dying in our place, receiving the judgement for our sin. Trying to be religious devoid of grace is a death knell to our relationship with God. In the words of Augustus Toplady "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling". When we sing about grace the sting of sin recedes. Not simply a theological concept to discuss and debate, grace is the means whereby we start, continue and finish our faith journey on earth and beyond.

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