

The Five Solas of the Reformation: Sola Gratia

OPENING TEXT: 2 TIMOTHY 1:9-10

INTRODUCTION

1. Are humans morally neutral or sufficiently able to understand the gospel and believe in Christ unaided?
2. The question of the Reformation was not whether grace is *necessary*. The question was is grace *sufficient*?
3. Why are you saved while your unbelieving neighbor is not? Is it because you are better in some way?

I. THE DEFINITION OF SOLA GRATIA

A. A Simple Definition

1. *Sola Gratia* is a Latin phrase, coined during the sixteenth century Reformation Movement.
2. It means that God's grace is the only basis for human salvation and is the effectual cause of it.

B. Historical Context and Exposition

1. The Canons of the Council of Orange (A.D. 529)

CANON 3. If anyone says that the grace of God can be conferred as a result of human prayer, but that it is not grace itself which makes us pray to God, he contradicts the prophet Isaiah, or the Apostle who says the same thing, "I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me" (Rom 10:20, quoting Isa. 65:1).

CANON 4. If anyone maintains that God awaits our will to be cleansed from sin, but does not confess that even our will to be cleansed comes to us through the infusion and working of the Holy Spirit, he resists the Holy Spirit himself who says through Solomon, "The will is prepared by the Lord" (Prov. 8:35, LXX), and the salutary word of the Apostle, "For God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13).

CANON 6. If anyone says that God has mercy upon us when, apart from his grace, we believe, will, desire, strive, labor, pray, watch, study, seek, ask, or knock, but does not confess that it is by the infusion and inspiration of the Holy Spirit within us that we have the faith, the will, or the strength to do all these things as we ought; or if anyone makes the assistance of grace depend on the humility or obedience of man and does not agree that it is a gift of grace itself that we are obedient and humble, he contradicts the Apostle who says, "What have you that you did not receive?" (1 Cor. 4:7), and, "But by the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Cor. 15:10).

CANON 7. If anyone affirms that we can form any right opinion or make any right choice which relates to the salvation of eternal life, as is expedient for us, or that we can be saved, that is, assent to the preaching of the gospel through our natural powers without the illumination and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who makes all men gladly assent to and believe in the truth, he is led astray by a heretical spirit, and does not understand the voice of God who says in the Gospel, "For apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5), and the word of the Apostle, "Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God" (2 Cor. 3:5).

CANON 18. That grace is not preceded by merit. Recompense is due to good works if they are performed; but grace, to which we have no claim, precedes them, to enable them to be done.

2. The Canons of the Synod of Dordt (1618) – The 3rd & 4th Points, Article 3: Total Inability

Therefore, all people are conceived in sin and are born children of wrath, unfit for any saving good, inclined to evil, dead in their sins, and slaves to sin; without the grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit they are neither willing nor able to return to God, to reform their distorted nature, or even to dispose themselves to such reform.

3. The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) – Chapter 9 Of Free Will (cf. Chapter 10)

IX:III. Man, by his fall into a state of sin, has wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation: so as, a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.

IX:IV. When God converts a sinner, and translates him into the state of grace, He frees him from his natural bondage under sin; and, by His grace alone, enables him freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good;

C. *A Modern Definition and Affirmation*

1. **The Cambridge Declaration (1996)**

Sola Gratia: The Erosion Of The Gospel

Unwarranted confidence in human ability is a product of fallen human nature. This false confidence now fills the evangelical world; from the self-esteem gospel, to the health and wealth gospel, from those who have transformed the gospel into a product to be sold and sinners into consumers who want to buy, to others who treat Christian faith as being true simply because it works. This silences the doctrine of justification regardless of the official commitments of our churches.

God's grace in Christ is not merely necessary but is the sole efficient cause of salvation. We confess that human beings are born spiritually dead and are incapable even of cooperating with regenerating grace.

Thesis Three: Sola Gratia

We reaffirm that in salvation we are rescued from God's wrath by his grace alone. It is the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit that brings us to Christ by releasing us from our bondage to sin and raising us from spiritual death to spiritual life.

We deny that salvation is in any sense a human work. Human methods, techniques or strategies by themselves cannot accomplish this transformation. Faith is not produced by our unregenerated human nature.

2. **James Montgomery Boice, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009)**

When the Reformers spoke about "grace alone" (sola gratia), they were saying that sinners have no claim upon God, none at all; that God owes them nothing but punishment for their sins; and that, if he saves them in spite of their sins, which he does in the case of those who are being saved, it is only because it pleases him to do it and for no other reason. Today, large numbers of evangelicals undermine and effectively destroy this doctrine by supposing that human beings are basically good; that God owes everyone a chance to be saved; and that, if we are saved, in the final analysis it is because of our own good decision to receive the Jesus who is offered to us.

D. *Summarizing the Central Presuppositions and Affirmations*

1. Because of the Fall human beings are undeserving of divine favor and are incapable of saving themselves.
2. Because of the Fall human beings are unable to come to Christ, believe in Him, or do any saving good without the aid of divine grace.
3. God's grace is the sole basis and effectual cause of human salvation.
4. God must first prepare and enable the human heart in order for it to believe and be saved.
5. Any goodness, faith, repentance, or holy desire in human beings is a gift of God's grace.

II. **THE AFFIRMATIONS OF SOLA GRATIA**

A. *Sola Gratia Affirms Human Beings are Undeserving of Favor and Incapable of Saving Themselves*

1. God made mankind in His image, but we thoroughly corrupted ourselves. **Gen. 8:21; Ecc. 7:29**
2. Fallen humanity imagines itself as basically good, but Scripture says otherwise. **Ro. 3:9-20**

B. *Sola Gratia Affirms Humans are Unable to Come to Christ, Believe, or Do Good without Divine Aid*

1. No man can come to God by his own power. He must be drawn by the Savior. **Jn. 6:44; 10:25-27**
2. Unregenerate people cannot respond in a saving way to God. **Ro. 8:8; 1Co. 2:14; Heb. 11:6**

C. *Sola Gratia Affirms God's Grace is the Sole Basis and Effectual Cause of Salvation*

1. God saves people because He is good, not because any of us are. **Eph. 2:4-7; 2Ti. 1:9; Tit. 3:3-7**
2. God's grace is effectual, i.e. it actually saves, not just gives opportunity. **Jn. 1:12-13; Ro. 9:16**

D. *Sola Gratia Affirms God Must Prepare and Enable the Heart for a Person to Believe and Be Saved*

1. Faith and repentance are gifts of God; we cannot believe without grace. **Php. 1:29; 2Tim. 2:25**
2. Salvation is the gift of God, from beginning to end, entirely unmerited. **Eph. 2:8-9; Rom. 6:23**

E. *Sola Gratia Affirms Any Goodness, Faith, or Holy Desire in Humans is a Gift of God's Grace*

1. The gospel excludes (not just prohibits) any reason for boasting. **Ro. 3:27; 1Co. 1:30-31; 4:7**
2. It is only by the grace of God and because of it any of us are saved. **1Ti. 1:12-16; 1Cor. 15:10**

III. THE CLARIFICATION OF SOLA GRATIA

A. *Sola Gratia Does NOT Mean Human Beings Are Not Responsible for Their Sin*

1. The Bible is clear humanity is entirely responsible for their descent into sin. **Ro. 3:23; 5:12**
2. The reason we are lost is our own fault, and God is no way caused our condition. **Jas. 1:13-15**

B. *Sola Gratia Does NOT Mean God's Choice of Some to Save is Arbitrary or Unjust*

1. Some object to God's enabling some to believe or assume He does so equally for everyone.
2. But we cannot judge God's actions since He is not obligated to save anyone. **Ro. 9:14-24**
3. We should be amazed God had mercy on us, not critical of His grace and mercy. **Matt. 20:8-15**
4. Is God free to do as He pleases? Is He obligated to give us grace? **Ro. 11:5-6**

C. *Sola Gratia Does NOT Mean God Saves or Coerces People Against Their Will*

1. Read the above statements again. People freely choose Christ when enabled to do so. **Jn. 10:27**
2. God does not force His will; He gives believers a new heart to enable them. (*cf. Pharaoh vs Saul*)

D. *Sola Gratia Does NOT Mean the Elect Do Not Make a Real Choice to Repent and Believe*

1. Humans are not robots. We freely choose sin, and when reborn we truly love Christ. **Jn. 1:12-13**
2. God's grace initiates and enables the obedient response of a believing heart. **Jer. 29:13; cf. 24:7**

"In fact, salvation is of the Lord from beginning to end. Yes, I must believe. Yes, I must respond. Yes, I must receive Christ. But for me to say "yes" to any of those things, my heart must first be changed by the sovereign, effectual power of God the Holy Spirit." –R. C. Sproul, "Grace Alone" TableTalk
<http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/grace-alone-sproul/> (accessed Dec. 31, 2014)

3. God gives us faith, but we believe. We believe through grace. **Acts 18:27; Deut. 30:6**

IV. THE APPLICATION OF SOLA GRATIA

A. *How Sola Gratia Will Affect Our Church's Life and Ministry*

1. We should not put our faith in programs, methods, or ministries but in the God who saves. **1Co. 1:18-25**
2. Christianity is not a consumer product, and the Church is a worshipping community, not a business.
3. Sola gratia properly understood and applied makes irrelevant much of the "church growth" industry.

B. *How Sola Gratia Will Affect Our Daily Lives*

1. You were dead, but God made you alive. You didn't come on your own; He came to get you.
2. "Getting saved" is not something you did or even cooperated with; it is what Christ did for you.
3. Knowing the sovereign, undeserved, effectual grace of God makes a big difference in our lives.

CONCLUSION

1. He saved us and called us, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace.
2. Do you believe that? Do you understand what that means? This didn't happen because of you.
3. What we did in believing in Christ and repenting of our sins was possible because of what God did for us.
4. Do you hear the Shepherd's voice? He is calling you to repent, follow Him, and trust in Him alone.

EXTENDED QUOTATIONS

The Canons of the Council of Orange (A.D. 529)

CANON 1. If anyone denies that it is the whole man, that is, both body and soul, that was "changed for the worse" through the offense of Adam's sin, but believes that the freedom of the soul remains unimpaired and that only the body is subject to corruption, he is deceived by the error of Pelagius and contradicts the scripture which says, "The soul that sins shall die" (Ezek. 18:20); and, "Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are the slaves of the one whom you obey?" (Ro. 6:16); and, "For whatever overcomes a man, to that he is enslaved" (2 Pet. 2:19).

CANON 2. If anyone asserts that Adam's sin affected him alone and not his descendants also, or at least if he declares that it is only the death of the body which is the punishment for sin, and not also that sin, which is the death of the soul, passed through one man to the whole human race, he does injustice to God and contradicts the Apostle, who says, "Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned" (Rom. 5:12).

CANON 3. If anyone says that the grace of God can be conferred as a result of human prayer, but that it is not grace itself which makes us pray to God, he contradicts the prophet Isaiah, or the Apostle who says the same thing, "I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me" (Rom 10:20, qtd. Isa. 65:1).

CANON 4. If anyone maintains that God awaits our will to be cleansed from sin, but does not confess that even our will to be cleansed comes to us through the infusion and working of the Holy Spirit, he resists the Holy Spirit himself who says through Solomon, "The will is prepared by the Lord" (Prov. 8:35, LXX), and the salutary word of the Apostle, "For God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13).

CANON 5. If anyone says that not only the increase of faith but also its beginning and the very desire for faith, by which we believe in Him who justifies the ungodly and comes to the regeneration of holy baptism -- if anyone says that this belongs to us by nature and not by a gift of grace, that is, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit amending our will and turning it from unbelief to faith and from godlessness to godliness, it is proof that he is opposed to the teaching of the Apostles, for blessed Paul says, "And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6). And again, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8). For those who state that the faith by which we believe in God is natural make all who are separated from the Church of Christ by definition in some measure believers.

CANON 6. If anyone says that God has mercy upon us when, apart from his grace, we believe, will, desire, strive, labor, pray, watch, study, seek, ask, or knock, but does not confess that it is by the infusion and inspiration of the Holy Spirit within us that we have the faith, the will, or the strength to do all these things as we ought; or if anyone makes the assistance of grace depend on the humility or obedience of man and does not agree that it is a gift of grace itself that we are obedient and humble, he contradicts the Apostle who says, "What have you that you did not receive?" (1 Cor. 4:7), and, "But by the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Cor. 15:10).

CANON 7. If anyone affirms that we can form any right opinion or make any right choice which relates to the salvation of eternal life, as is expedient for us, or that we can be saved, that is, assent to the preaching of the gospel through our natural powers without the illumination and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who makes all men gladly assent to and believe in the truth, he is led astray by a heretical spirit, and does not understand the voice of God who says in the Gospel, "For apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5), and the word of the Apostle, "Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God" (2 Cor. 3:5).

CANON 18. That grace is not preceded by merit. Recompense is due to good works if they are performed; but grace, to which we have no claim, precedes them, to enable them to be done.

CANON 19. That a man can be saved only when God shows mercy. Human nature, even though it remained in that sound state in which it was created, could be no means save itself, without the assistance of the Creator; hence since man cannot safe-guard his salvation without the grace of God, which is a gift, how will he be able to restore what he has lost without the grace of God?

CANON 20. That a man can do no good without God. God does much that is good in a man that the man does not do; but a man does nothing good for which God is not responsible, so as to let him do it.

CONCLUSION. And thus according to the passages of holy scripture quoted above or the interpretations of the ancient Fathers we must, under the blessing of God, preach and believe as follows. The sin of the first man has so impaired and weakened free will that no one thereafter can either love God as he ought or believe in God or do good for God's sake, unless the grace of divine mercy has preceded him. We therefore believe that the glorious faith which was given to Abel the righteous, and Noah, and Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and to all the saints of old, and which the Apostle Paul commends in extolling them (Heb. 11), was not given through natural goodness as it was before to Adam, but was bestowed by the grace of God. And we know and also believe that even after the coming of our Lord this grace is not to be found in the free will of all who desire to be baptized, but is bestowed by the kindness of Christ, as has already been frequently stated and as the Apostle Paul declares, "For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake" (Phil. 1:29). And again, "He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6). And again, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and it is not your own doing, it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8). And as the Apostle says of himself, "I have obtained mercy to be faithful" (1 Cor. 7:25, cf. 1 Tim. 1:13). He did not say, "because I was faithful," but "to be faithful." And again, "What have you that you did not receive?" (1 Cor. 4:7). And again, "Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights" (Jas. 1:17). And again, "No one can receive anything except what is given him from heaven" (John 3:27). There are innumerable passages of holy scripture which can be quoted to prove the case for grace, but they have been omitted for the sake of brevity, because further examples will not really be of use where few are deemed sufficient.

The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) – Chapters 9 and 10: Excerpts

IX:III. Man, by his fall into a state of sin, has wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation: so as, a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.

IX:IV. When God converts a sinner, and translates him into the state of grace, He frees him from his natural bondage under sin; and, by His grace alone, enables him freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good;

X:I. All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, He is pleased, in His appointed time, effectually to call, by His Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death, in which they are by nature to grace and salvation, by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God, taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them an heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and, by His almighty power, determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ: yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace.

X:II. This effectual call is of God's free and special grace alone, not from anything at all foreseen in man, who is altogether passive therein, until, being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it.

The Cambridge Declaration (1996)

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Unwarranted confidence in human ability is a product of fallen human nature. This false confidence now fills the evangelical world; from the self-esteem gospel, to the health and wealth gospel, from those who have transformed the gospel into a product to be sold and sinners into consumers who want to buy, to others who treat Christian faith as being true simply because it works. This silences the doctrine of justification regardless of the official commitments of our churches.

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