



The Five Reformation Principles

Study 4: Sola Gratia (Eph 2:1-10)

o The doctrine of “sola gratia” states that God alone initiates the salvation of undeserving sinners by choosing the elect from eternity, providing the ground of salvation in the death of Christ, and causing faith to operate in the elect by the power of the Holy Spirit.

I. Recovery of the doctrine.

1. In “sola scriptura” the Reformers declared the authority of Scripture over church traditions. In “sola fide” they declared that faith alone justifies, not the works performed by the sinner. Linked to “sola fide” was “sola gratia” in which the grace of God is declared to be the cause of faith and, therefore, of salvation. Faith is the means, or instrument, by which we receive salvation while grace is the efficient cause of faith.
 - The RC Church also taught the necessity of “grace”, but put a different meaning to the word. To both Protestants and RCs, grace is the unmerited favour of God shown to undeserving men. To Protestants, God’s grace leads to the gift of faith by which the sinner is justified. To RCs grace operates in such a way as to enable the sinner to merit more graces, enabling him to do works that, together with faith, justifies him before God. Salvation is, therefore, a *synergism*, i.e. divine grace operates with human co-operation. Protestants believe in *monergism*, i.e. divine grace alone saves. Like the RC Church, the Eastern Orthodox churches also hold to synergism.
2. When Arminianism troubled the Reformed churches, the question of salvation by grace was brought to the fore. The Arminians affirmed the doctrine of salvation by grace alone, but put a spin the the meaning of grace differently from the RCs. The claim is made that man is given “prevenient grace” (a term that had appeared in RC theology) by which the Holy Spirit enables him to understand the Gospel. Prevenient grace is distributed to everyone, without which no one is capable of receiving salvation. Since man has free will, those who respond in faith will be saved.
 - John Owen, in “A Display of Arminianism” (Works, Vol 10), shows that Arminianism is opposed to the Bible’s teaching of the immutability of God’s decree, of predestination, and of original sin. They teach that grace, in which the Holy Spirit works by moral persuasion in the hearing of God’s word, may be successfully opposed by human will. Arminianism is, in reality, another form of Pelagianism, known as Semi-Pelagianism.
 - Hyper-Calvinism affected a section of the Particular Baptists in the 18th century, resulting in the gospel not being preached. Hyper-Calvinism emphasises the sovereignty of God at the expense of human responsibility. The gospel is not to be “freely offered” to the hearers as, among them, are the non-elects whom God does not intend to save. To offer the gospel freely to such would be to make God appear insincere. The gospel, therefore, is offered

only to those who show signs that they are seeking salvation, i.e. those who are awakened by the Holy Spirit.

3. We have referred to the Second Great Awakening in America during which the gospel was perverted by “easy-believism” (or “decisionism”). A chief protagonist of easy-believism was Charles Finney (1792-1875). He believed that revivals could be produced with the right combination of human techniques. He denied original sin and the need for regeneration by the Holy Spirit. He was, in fact, a Pelagian.
- We have noted how Fundamentalism clashed with Modernism in the early 20th century. After the Scopes Trial of 1925, Fundamentalism in America fragmented. By 1950, Neo-evangelicalism and Ecumenism arose, finding common ground in social concerns. From the 1960s, the Charismatic movement arose, at the same time as the Reformed movement. The Charismatics emphasise subjective feelings and the restoration of the sign gifts, while Reformed people emphasise the objective truths of Scripture and the sovereignty of God.
- Apart from the Reformed and some sections of other evangelicals, the doctrine of “sola gratia” is hardly heard today.

II. Implications of the doctrine.

1. Today, those who are Arminian or hold to a modified Arminianism would call an evangelistic meeting a “revival meeting”, practise the “altar call”, and engage in decisionism in personal witness. Coupled to a prevailing man-centredness, the necessity of teaching “sola gratia” is obvious.
 - A lack of appreciation of the doctrine of Total Depravity lies at the bottom of the perversion or denial of “sola gratia”. If man is sinful in his total being - including his will - there is no possibility of him saving himself. Neither can he do anything *to contribute* to his own salvation. This condition of man is described as spiritual death in the Bible (cf Eph 2:1-3). Repentance and faith in Christ are the gifts of God which enable him to receive the salvation fully accomplished by Christ.
2. The doctrine of “sola gratia” is inseparably connected with the doctrine of regeneration. In regeneration, the Holy Spirit implants new life in the soul to instantaneously change the whole man so that he is able to respond to the gospel (John 3:3, 5-8; 1 John 3:9).
 - Regeneration is solely the work of God by the Spirit, normally accompanied by the preached word (Rom 10:17; 1 Pet 1:22-23). Regeneration is not a “all-at-once” work of the Spirit, but a “once-for-all” work of the Spirit. It leads to enlightenment, conviction, repentance, and faith. These are the effects, while regeneration is the cause.
 - Conversion (i.e. repentance & faith) is both a gift and a duty (cf 2 Chron 15:2; Acts 2:38; Rom 10:13; 1 John 3:23). The Arminians over-emphasise the duty, leading to many false conversions. The Hyper-Calvinists emphasise God’s sovereignty, failing to freely offer the gospel to sinners. The command of Scripture is for us to preach to all alike, and to let the Holy Spirit apply the preaching to the elect (cf. Matt 23:37; John 3:16-17; etc.).
 - There are Reformed people who hold to the “all-at-once” view of regeneration, who are consequently hampered in continuing to minister the word of God to seekers until they are saved. They have the mistaken view that since regeneration is the work of God, and only those regenerated can understand and respond to the truth, it makes no difference what we preach on, or how we preach. Instead of gospel sermons, they focus on teaching the Bible in a consecutive manner. They fail to understand that the gospel may be preached from any passage of the Bible, and that the message must distinctively be on “Jesus Christ and Him crucified”, aimed at the saving of souls (cf. Mark 2:17; Rom 3:19).

= A true appreciation of salvation by God's grace leads to deep humility and thanksgiving - characteristics not seen in much of evangelicalism today.

Review Questions

1. Define "sola gratia".
2. Compare "sola scriptura", "sola fide" and "sola gratia".
3. In salvation, what is *synergism* and what is *monergism*?
4. According to John Owen, what doctrines of the Bible are opposed by Arminianism?
5. During the Second Great Awakening, what and who perverted the gospel?
6. What do the Charismatics emphasize in contrast to the Reformed people?
7. A lack of appreciation of what doctrine lies at the bottom of the denial or perversion of "sola gratia" seen today?
8. What two contrasting views of regeneration are found among Reformed people?
9. How do Arminians and Hyper-Calvinists differ in their understanding of conversion as a gift and a duty?
10. What possible adverse consequences in gospel preaching follow those who hold to the "all-at-once view" of regeneration?

Assignment/Discussion

Deep humility and thanksgiving should characterize those who properly grasp the doctrine of "sola gratia". The complaint of some Christians toward Reformed people is that they seem to be proud of their theology. Assuming this to be true of at least some Reformed people, what may we say about their grasp of "sola gratia"?

Memory Passage (Eph 2:8-9)

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast.
