

THE SPRINGFIELDER is published quarterly by the faculty of Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Illinois, of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

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Indexed in: INDEX TO RELIGIOUS PERIODICAL LITERATURE, *published by the American Theological Library Association, McCormick Seminary Library, Chicago, Illinois.*

Clergy changes of address reported to Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Missouri, will also cover mailing change of *The Springfielder*. Other changes of address should be sent to the Business Manager of *The Springfielder*, Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Illinois 62702.

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Commentary On The Essay: "What Commitment to The 'Sola Gratia' in The Lutheran Confessions Involves"

E. H. HEINTZEN

ANY ATTEMPT to evaluate the essay "What Commitment to the "Sola Gratia" in the Lutheran Confessions Involves" raises the primary question: What does this essay set out to accomplish? The essay itself answers the question as follows: to "purpose to sketch in broad outline the significance of the grace of God for the life of the church and to point up, in a series of antitheses, the relevance of this central Lutheran teaching for the life and work of the church in our day." In keeping with this stated purpose, the essay presents the matter under three headings: I. The God of All Grace; II. The Word of Grace; III. The People of Grace.

It is the purpose of this evaluation to be selective; not to discuss every section in detail; nor to quote extensively from the essay. It is hoped that the reader will have the committee's essay on "Sola Gratia" at hand for reference if needed. Nevertheless, a brief overview may serve to convey the general thrust of the essay and provide the context for specific points to be treated.

I. *The God of All Grace.* Beginning at the beginning, the essay discusses the grace of the Creator in His creation, a work in which His Son Jesus Christ had a part. The grace of the Creator is manifested in the creation and care of man. He made man in His image. Man sinned in that he refused to live in dependence upon this Creator-grace; in refusing grace, man forfeited his life and called down upon himself the wrath of God. The Law only intensifies the situation created by man's disobedience.

Only the grace of God for His disobedient creature can restore man to his faithful Creator. In Christ "who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification" is seen grace in its full essential sense as the undesired and undeserved favor of God.

The work of the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son is a work of grace; through Him the love of God, manifested in the cross of Christ, is poured into the hearts of men.

II. *The Word of Grace.* "Commitment to the *Sola Gratia* of our confessions means that we hear the Word of Grace in the promise of the prophets and the proclamation of the apostles as God's miraculous Nevertheless over against the Law . . ." God's reconciling act of grace lives on and works in his inspired Word and Sacraments.

III. *The People of Grace.* "Commitment to the *Sola Gratia* of our confessions means that we live, work, and witness far and near

in the world as the people of grace, a people created and controlled by the Word of Grace, who put their trust wholly in the grace of God and confidently await the new world which grace will create." The people of grace is a company of believers. The word of grace is a call . . . it gathers the people of God, through the working of the Holy Spirit. "Grace is inscribed over the whole life and work of the church. The reign of grace is intolerant toward both legalism and libertinism.

Then follow the *Antitheses*. "Commitment to the *Sola Gratia* of our confessions involves an articulate rejection of all that calls the grace of God into question." Examples of attitudes and practices which call the grace of God into question today are cited, in keeping with the statement of purpose "to point up . . . the relevance of this central Lutheran teaching for the life and work of the church in our day."

In general, the document provides a succinct statement of what the authors feel is involved in commitment to the "Sola Gratia" of the Lutheran Confessions. Obviously not everything could be said. However, what is said seems to be sufficient for the stated purpose of "sketching in broad outline the significance of the grace of God for the life . . . and work of the church today."

Of particular interest for our purposes is Part I, the God of All Grace, which falls into three parts. The threefold arrangement corresponds to the Articles of the Creed. This manner of treating the grace of God implies—in view of the title of the essay—that the treatment is in accord with the Lutheran Confessions; more specifically, that grace properly belongs to the First Article as well as to the Second and Third Articles. Furthermore, that this recognition is involved in one's commitment to the Lutheran Confessions.

It is precisely on this point, namely, the idea of Creator-grace, that some questions arise. Is this concept to be found in, and is it involved in commitment to, the Lutheran Confessions?

Admittedly, the Confessions speak overwhelmingly of "sola gratia" in connection with Justification (AC IV; Apol. IV, V, VI, XX; Large Cat., the Creed, Second Art.) and in connection with Sanctification (AC V, VII; Apol. VII, VIII, Large Cat., the Creed, Third Article). This is true not merely of specific articles but of the Confessions in general.

There are some obvious historical reasons for this. At the time of the Reformation the points of controversy involved chiefly the questions relating to justification and sanctification. It was Rome's vitiating of the doctrine of "sola gratia" by its teaching of *gratia infusa* and faith and works to which Luther reacted. The confessors, likewise, addressed themselves to Rome's false teachings on divine grace and human merit in justification and to Crypto-Calvinistic notions of synergism. It was in these areas mainly that the grace of God came into question.

The doctrine of Creation was not part of the controversy. No one apparently was raising the question of the grace of God in re-

lation to His creation and preservation of the world. The confessors therefore had no need to address themselves at length to this question. Nevertheless, the idea of divine grace with respect to creation is to be found in the Confessions. In the familiar words of Luther's explanation of the First Article in his Small Catechism (one of the primary Lutheran Confessions) the idea of grace is beautifully, and unmistakably, articulated: "I believe that God has made me and all creatures . . . and all this purely out of fatherly divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me . . ." The words "divine goodness and mercy" are synonymous with divine grace. The disclaimer "without any merit or worthiness in me" excludes all human merit and imply grace *alone*.

Again, the essay under discussion cites the following from the Large Catechism, The Creed:

. . . But the Creed brings us pure grace and makes us upright and pleasing to God. Through this knowledge we come to love and delight in all the commandments of God because we see that God gives Himself completely to us, with all his gifts and his power, to help us keep the Ten Commandments: the Father gives us creation, Christ all His works, the Holy Spirit all his gifts. (Tappert, p. 420).

In these words Luther included the creation as a gift of God's boundless grace. Scripture says that the just and the unjust are alike the recipients of divine grace; but the unjust do not acknowledge this grace.

Again, in his Large Catechism, Luther, in his concluding remarks on the First Article of the Creed, conjoins (but does not necessarily equate) God's blessings of creation and redemption:

For here we see how the Father has given Himself to us, with all His creatures, has abundantly provided for us in this life, and further, has showered us with inexpressible eternal treasures through His Son and the Holy Spirit . . . (Tappert, 413).

While the Confessions associate "sola gratia" with the doctrines of Justification and Sanctification, they nowhere exclude divine grace from the doctrine of Creation. Man's creation and preservation are not due to any worthiness or merit in the creature. Even before the fall man was utterly dependent upon divine favor. After the fall his need for God's unmerited love was infinitely greater. In sending His only Son to redeem His rebellious children, He revealed the breadth, and length, and depth, and height of His love in a manner heretofore unknown. It is this unique manifestation of His love for sinners which the New Testament usually, though not always, designates by the term grace (cf. John 3, 16, *eegapeesen*, and Eph. 2, 8-9, and *chariti*). The term "sola gratia" indeed does have special significance for the doctrine of justification in the Confessions. But does this necessarily limit divine grace to man's justification? The Confessions, as has been shown, do speak of God's grace in creation.

The technical use of a term need not preclude the recognition of its basic, broader concept. In other words while "*sola gratia*" is primarily associated with justification, the concept of *gratia* still underlies all care of God for men. And being grace it is of its very nature *sola*. It is just as appropriate to praise God for His unmerited grace in a Thanksgiving Day service for His material blessings as it is to thank Him for His spiritual blessings—to thank Him for His *giving* grace as well as for His *forgiving* grace. It is all grace, unmerited divine favor, which answers to *all* of man's needs of body and soul.

Some apprehension has been expressed over the term "Creator-grace" and its implications. And with good reason, for some theologians have equated or tended to equate creation and redemption. This confusion has then led some in the direction of universalism, an aberration which has in one form or another plagued the church at least since the time of Origen. But truth has always been abused. St. Paul knew that even the great doctrine of salvation by grace would be misinterpreted and abused by some (Rom. 6: 1), but that unhappy possibility did not keep him from proclaiming that truth and speaking a word of judgment against those who abused it. The point here is simply that if the concept of Creator-grace is defensible, then mere fear of possible abuse ought not be permitted to rule it out.

The document on "*Sola Gratia*" has also been criticized for not expressly rejecting the error of synergism—one of the points in controversy earlier between the Missouri Synod and at least some of synods now embraced by the present American Lutheran Church. The concern now is that some individuals in the ALC may still hold false views on this doctrine. The essay on "*Sola Gratia*", it is true, does not specifically mention the word synergism. But the notion of human cooperation is implicitly excluded in the Antitheses, No. III:

The grace of God is free grace; it costs man nothing. The Gospel is unconditional promise and proffer of grace in Christ Jesus, to be received in the beggary of faith. Faith, too, is the creation and gift of God. The grace of God is therefore called into question when faith or its fruits, is thought of as supplementing or contributing to, the free grace of the God who justifies the ungodly.

To sum up briefly: It has been customary among us, because of the historical context in which the Confessions were formulated, to relate the term *sola gratia* exclusively to the Second and Third Articles (Justification and Sanctification) of the Creed. And correctly so. Nevertheless, the Confessions neither explicitly nor implicitly exclude the First Article (Creation) from the realm of divine grace. To the contrary, divine grace, which is always *sola*, is affirmed in creation in terms of "divine goodness and mercy" and similar words and expressions. The Confessions everywhere proclaim the grace of God—the alone-giving grace, the alone-saving grace, and the alone-sanctifying grace. The commissioners' essay evidently intends to set the "*sola gratia*" within the larger context of divine grace,

as Part I, "The God of All Grace," indicates. The first part is, then, introductory to Parts II and III which deal directly and specifically with commitment to the "sola gratia" in the Lutheran Confessions, and what this commitment involves.

Finally, questions regarding the propriety of the term "Creator-grace" appear to arise not so much between the Missouri Synod and the ALC, but among some members of the Missouri Synod. Actually, it is difficult to see anything in the essay on "Sola Gratia" which poses a real problem as far as the question of fellowship between Missouri and ALC is concerned.