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## Contents

PAGE

### EDITORIAL

*Toward Denver*

### RESPONSES TO "WHAT COMMITMENT TO THE 'SOLA GRATIA' IN THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS INVOLVES"

RICHARD J. SCHULTZ.....	3
ERICH H. HEINTZEN.....	7

### RESPONSES TO "THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS AND 'SOLA SCRIPTURA'"

EUGENE F. KLUG.....	12
FRED KRAMER.....	23

### RESPONSES TO "THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH IN THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS"

JOHN F. JOHNSON.....	28
JAMES WEIS.....	34

BOOK REVIEWS..... 42

BOOKS RECEIVED..... 68

INDEX TO VOLUME 32 (1968-69)..... 70

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# Creative Grace in The Essay "What Commitment to The 'Sola Gratia' of The Lutheran Confessions Involves"

RICHARD J. SCHULTZ

THE THREE ESSAYS prepared by the commissioners of The American Lutheran Church and The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in the search for consensus were not prepared or offered as official union documents. No one is asked to vote on them. They were meant as partial, sample expressions of the consensus to which the commissioners bear witness by a special document wherein they assure the churches that in their meetings they did achieve consensus. The essays were presented to the churches for study and discussion. They were to be springboards for discussion and not articles of subscription.

Since these essays were not presented as the instruments by which fellowship will or will not be declared or effected, they may be looked upon as rather free-wheeling statements. By "free-wheeling" we do not mean "careless." Rather, such essays are not subject to the rigorous and extremely cautious verbal ordering required of "official documents."

In the process of studying the essays, one is free to express personal reactions to the concepts and the wording. To "like" or "dislike" the expressions in the essays is not necessarily indicative of one's viewpoint about fellowship. This article does not enter into pros and cons of fellowship. The reader is asked to bear this in mind.

A detailed reaction to the essay on "Sola Gratia" would require many pages. It would surely include many commendatory words for the clear and sometimes poetic expressions on "Sola Gratia." One rejoices at many fine, Lutheran, Scriptural emphases which are set forth. The theme of salvation by grace through faith without human merit is not missed.

The emphasis of this brief reaction, however, is upon the opening paragraphs of the essay. It is meant to express a concern about the use of the concept of *creative grace*. The writer has examined the essay many times, prayerfully. In the context of the whole essay one can see that the authors seem to use the literary device of starting with a broad, general concept and then narrowing it to specific applications. God is the God of all grace, and therefore specifically of saving grace in Christ. All that God does is an act of undeserved mercy for man.

However, when the topic under consideration is "What Commitment to the 'Sola Gratia' of the Lutheran Confessions Involves," one may wonder if the intrusion of the concept of creative grace is truly in accord with the confessions and if it is helpful.

Perhaps our concern is distinctly pedagogical. It may also have an element of worry about where pressing the concept of creative grace could end. Such fuzzy suggestions of indefinite dire possibilities are rather cowardly. The point will not be pressed. Rather, the emphasis will be this: "Why not retain the confessional usage of the concept of grace?"

What is gained by squeezing the word *grace* into God's creative and providential activity? It is interesting to see that many fine Bible references listed in the opening paragraphs of the essay do not list any which actually employ the word "grace." They refer to the goodness and power of God in creating and sustaining the earth and its creatures and inhabitants. This is an excellent teaching to recall, but it is not involved in what Lutherans talk about when they speak about the great Reformation theme of "Sola Gratia."

The essay says: "Both the Old and New Testament witness to creation as an act of grace by putting creation into direct relation with the saving activity of God." By "direct relation" the essay refers to the fact that in proximate verses and even in single verses of Scripture we do read that the God who redeems is the same God who created His people and the world. We fail to follow the logic of the conclusion that this witnesses to "creation as an act of grace."

The essay further states: "The grace of the Creator is manifested in the creation and care of man." Again, one is moved to ask whether it is *grace* which is thus manifested. Is it true that *grace* as Lutherans use the term is manifested in the rain and sunshine and enzymic action of the soil? And when any human being has benefitted from the providential, sustaining acts of God, has he received grace?

To all of this one might reply that in a manner of speaking one can refer to all of the beneficial acts of God toward man as acts of grace. The question is whether or not such a concept of grace is helpful and whether it reflects the "Sola Gratia" of the Confessions (which is the announced theme of the essay).

In a recent national paid advertisement, the Knights of Columbus used as an attention-getting headline the question: "The Grace of God—What Does It Mean?" They say: "Saved from misfortune . . . or blessed in a worldly way . . . some pious and well-meaning people are wont to say: 'It was only by the grace of God.' This may reflect a worthy attitude of appreciation toward God, but it doesn't necessarily reflect the understanding of divine grace every Christian should have." The advertisement then goes on to present the traditional Roman doctrine of grace as infused grace. As little as a general, providential grace suffices for the Roman Catholics, so little does it suffice to express the great "Sola Gratia" which the Lutheran confessors opposed to *gratia infusa*.

It is instructive to study the confessions where they employ the term grace. The Augsburg Confession refers to "grace" as a state into which men are received *because of Christ's merits*. Article V:4: ". . . that God, not for our own merits, but for Christ's sake, justi-

fies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ's sake." Article XX:9: "First, that our works cannot reconcile God or merit forgiveness of sins, grace, and justification, but that we obtain this only by faith, when we believe that we are received into favor for Christ's sake, who alone has been set forth the Mediator and Propitiation . . . ."

The Augsburg Confession speaks of "grace" as something obtained for Christ's sake. Article XXVIII:52: "It is necessary that the chief article of the Gospel be preserved, to wit, that we obtain grace freely by faith in Christ, and not for certain observances or acts of worship devised by men."

In speaking of creation, The Large Catechism (The Creed, I:23) says: ". . . it is God who gives and does all these things, that therein we sense and see His paternal heart, and His transcendent love toward us." Note that Luther uses the word *love* to denote the divine motivation for creation and preservation.

"Grace," on the other hand, The Large Catechism places under the second article (The Creed, II:30): ". . . Jesus Christ . . . made us free, and brought us again into the favor and grace of the Father, and has taken us as His own property under His shelter and protection, that He may govern us by His righteousness, wisdom, power, life and blessedness." In the Large Catechism, The Creed, III:54 Luther notes: ". . . the grace of God is secured through Christ . . . ." Later in the section on the Creed, III:68 he adds: ". . . but this (namely, the doctrine of faith) brings pure grace, and makes us godly and acceptable to God."

Again, in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, III:106 we read; "But that virtue justifies which apprehends Christ, which communicates to us Christ's merits, by which we receive grace and peace from God. But this virtue is faith."

In view of this use of the term *grace*, one shies at the statement of the essay that ". . . man's fall was that he willed to be 'like God', independent of the grace of God (Gen. 3)." One searches Genesis 3 in vain to find a statement that man declared himself free from God's *grace*. Grace, as the Confessions refer to it, was not needed by man prior to the Fall. It is offered to men as God's solution to the results of the Fall. Man rejected God's dominion.

The essay repeats the theme of creative grace by suggesting that mankind is "united in revolt against the grace of the Creator." This revolt then seems to be defined as the action of fallen man who "ignores God's continued manifestation of Himself in the things that He has made." We may be misreading at this point, but it seems easy to draw the conclusion that the grace at which man revolts is equivalent to whatever it is that God reveals about Himself in the things that He has made. That the essayists really do not mean this is evidenced by their prior use of John 1:17: "Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." Man learns about God's eternal power and godhead as he contemplates creation, but he will never find grace in the things which God has made. For this revelation he must

turn to the specific revelation which comes only through the person and words and acts of His Son. The question is: Why use verbiage which gets one tangled up in what is definitely *not* involved in commitment to the "Sola Gratia" of the Lutheran Confessions?

In the light of the whole essay, it would be foolish to see too many shadows in the opening references to divine grace as creator grace. The essay does contain adequate testimony to the nature of grace as being God's forgiving action for the sake of Christ, apprehended by faith alone and accessible through a special revelation in the Scriptures.

For Lutherans committed to the "Sola Gratia" of the Confessions, grace is *not* manifested in creation and providence. The kind of grace referred to by "Sola Gratia" is specific, special and exclusive. It is a grace which operates in the redemptive activity of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. Without Christ's redemptive activity, the world receives God's love and care. He makes His rain to fall on the just and on the unjust. He seriously *offers* His saving grace to all, for Christ has objectively merited full salvation and forgiveness in the stead of all men. Yet, all men do not receive that grace.

If it is said that in a manner of speaking one may refer to all of God's activities on behalf of man as gracious acts, undeserved and proceeding from an omnipotent God who continues to sustain men who deserve only destruction, we may agree. Yet, when we are attempting to elucidate the idea of grace as it is presented in the Lutheran Confessions, we do well to avoid this unnecessary and confusing use. For the sake of clarity and in the interest of avoiding open doors which may lead people astray, language should remain precise.

Here and there today one notices these "new" uses of terms which then require explanation and denial of "what wasn't meant." Recently we read a book which offered so many and such conflicting definitions of a sacrament that anyone reading it found his head spinning. Careful, painstaking perusal indicated that the author was trying to express some good, old ideas by clothing them in rather spectacular terminology. To use current language to preach the Gospel is sound practice. To confuse ourselves by introducing unhelpful meanings when we are seeking clarity in our commitment to our standard confessions may be putting burrs under the saddle of the horse we are trying to gentle.